Critique Processes in Digital Journalism

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Abstract: Youth who participate in online communities such as DeviantArt and *Scratch* benefit from a lively, voluntary critique practice, which is often absent from classroom practices. However, face-to-face participatory cultures can mirror the kind of practices found in these online spaces. My research suggests that youth who participate in digital journalism engage in peer critique on a regular, ongoing basis; that youth use peer feedback from both novice and mentors to transform their understanding of digital journalism; and that recognition of an authentic, engaged audience can create organic critique opportunities.

Keywords: digital journalism, critique, feedback, digital media production

Major issues addressed

Any brief visit to sites such as DeviantArt demonstrates that critique is a lively voluntary process in online participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2007). In online participatory cultures, youth members of communities such as *Scratch* (Fields et al., 2013) and fan-fiction sites (Black, 2005; Magnifico, Curwood, & Lamar, 2015), regularly participate in organic critique and collaborative problem solving with like-minded peers as they feel that their contributions matter (Jenkins et al., 2007). However, when critique processes are moved to the classroom, critique is often teacher driven through carefully crafted peer review questions that encourage youth to respond as they believe their teachers would want to hear (DePardo & Freedman, 1988; Ball, 2013). This reduces critique to a list of narrow topics, or feedback, and minimizes the amount of time youth spend conducting careful analysis.

Critique is not an easy task to teach, nor is it an easy task to learn. Critique requires moments of interaction where an author freely shares his or her draft with peers and discusses its ability to match the author's vision. While feedback occurs constantly during production, critique requires a level of analysis only possible with an understanding of the author's intent. This process becomes more complex when reviewers are asked to analyze digital texts that combine image, audio, and textual features into a single product. Perhaps for this reason, little has been written about critique practices of digital texts inside and outside of the classroom. Ball (2012) argues that critique processes are highly contextual and that criteria for assessing digital texts should be organically created with youth for each unique project. With this in mind, my case study explores the possibilities of critique in an unique interest driven face-to-face participatory culture where youth engage in video journalism production. The unique nature of digital journalism requires composing skills (coming up with a good story, characters); journalism skills (interviewing, ethics); video production skills (lighting, camera angles); and video editing skills. This complex process opens up numerous opportunities for collaboration and critique.

My work explores two research questions:

- Why do youth participate in critique while producing digital journalism?
- How do youth use feedback from the critique practice to revise their work?

Significance of the work

My study adds to current research on digital production providing a clearer understanding of youth digital critique processes. My study challenges traditional notions of peer review found in composition courses which suggests that critique is something that happens on a single peer review day and proposes that critique occurs regularly throughout the production process. Moreover, while previous research suggests that most composers recognize the complexity of audience throughout the composition process (Halverson & Magnifico, 2013), my work demonstrates how this recognition can drive critique. This conclusion has important implications for digital media educators who wish to create authentic opportunities for critique.

Theoretical approach

My work is grounded in the understanding that composition is a socially constructed activity (Brandt, 1990; Dyson, 1995; Nystrand, 1986). Just as Bakhtin (1981) argues that writing is an interaction between an individual and the social world, I recognize that youths' knowledge about writing is shaped by the socio-political landscape of the classroom; conversations with their peers; and interactions with educators. Moreover, as youth

compose texts, they integrate their own perceptions and perspectives on a given topic as language is never neutral, but about "giving and getting different perspectives on experience" (Gee, 2001, p. 716). Critique, therefore, is a process whereby peers read a text with their own perspective and offer their own way of viewing the world. As active members of a participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2007), I seek to understand the catalysts that inspire feedback and critique to occur, the extent to which youth seek out critique from their peers, the extent to which youth listen to their peers' perspectives throughout the composition process, how these perspectives mesh with their own perspectives, and then how this dialogic nature plays out as youth revise their work.

Methodological approach

I worked as a participant observer in a digital media course serving youth ages 15-18 for the length of one production cycle. Observations and field notes were key to understanding the ongoing critique practice that occurred regularly. I coded my field notes noting the impetus for critique (teacher initiated, author initiated, audience initiated); the moments of critique (pre-production, filming, editing, and post production); and the topics discussed during critique (cohesion of ideas, creating a clear message, and recognition of audience).

I collected storyboards, rough cuts, and final cuts of videos to determine the extent to which youth incorporated their peers' feedback. I conducted bidirectional artifact analysis, which combines narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and artifact analysis and allows researchers to move bidirectionally, "from final product backward and from initial idea forward" (Halverson & Magnifico, 2013, p. 406). I explored the relationship between students' final artifacts and their drafts to determine how and when students incorporated elements of critique into their final products.

Major findings

The digital media course resembled participatory cultures found outside of school in that students were offered low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement. In addition, students were intrinsically motivated through a common interest in creating digital journalism about student culture. Each week, youth worked in small groups to create video segments which were then combined to form their Friday video announcements, a comic and often satiric look at high school culture. This set up quickly created a community built on support, collaboration, and investment in one another's creative work. As youth recognized that the success of the video announcements rested not only in their unique segment but also on the collective episode they came to adapt their production practices. The collaborative goal of creating a successful and engaging program made feedback a regular occurrence.

Feedback catalysts

Throughout the production process, youth engaged in teacher initiated, author initiated, and audience initiated feedback processes from both experts and peers.

Table 1: Catalysts for Peer Feedback in Digital Journalism Production

Catalyst For Peer Feedback	**Moments of feedback**
Teacher initiated	1. Pitching stories to classmates during pre-production 2. Viewing rough cuts of videos with classmates prior to final editing 3. Using self assessment rubrics post production
Author initiated	1. Requesting group feedback throughout the planning process 2. Soliciting input from group members and experts throughout the filming process 3. Inviting feedback from all group members and experts with iMovie or Final Cut Pro knowledge during editing process
Audience initiated	1. Offering feedback during chance encounters throughout the filming and editing process

The teacher initiated feedback process occurred pre-production through story pitches; during production while viewing rough cuts; and postproduction with self-assessments. Author initiated and audience initiated peer feedback took place more regularly yet most often informally through group conversations. While authors regularly sought feedback from their group, they also sought out expert classmates based on their knowledge of software and their reputation for using tools in innovative and creative ways. As youth became more comfortable with the discourse of digital journalism, their roles wove back and forth between learning and mentoring. For example, one group was made up of five students, two of whom had extensive prior experience with Final Cut Pro. In the first two weeks, the two experts started off driving the revision choices while positioning themselves in front of the computer. After a week of watching and learning from the experts, novice students' feedback increased and they started taking control of the mouse when they wanted to demonstrate their vision to the rest of the group.

Critique practices

While students regularly provided feedback to their group members regarding topics such as visual, audio, and editing choices, in depth critique most often occurred when tied to audience considerations. Students showed keen attention to helping one another create segments with clear messages and visions that would hold their peers' attention. This often came into play as many groups sought to create parodies of popular series or recreate popular YouTube sensations. In particular, one group of three young producers sought to mimic a popular YouTube vlogger, but feared that their peers wouldn't recognize the connection with the original. They regularly presented drafts of their videos to the peers in the classroom to better understand whether their larger peer audience would understand their larger vision.

Youth also regularly worked together to revise their segments so that their teacher, who served as the executive producer and represented the larger voice of the faculty, would allow their segments to be shown during the Friday video announcements. Through this analysis, youth recognized two audiences: their peers and the faculty at their school. They navigated the complexities of composing for two audiences through organic peer critique practices.

Using peer feedback for revision

Early bidirectional artifact analysis suggests that youth revised their work constantly throughout the composing process using expert and peer feedback, picking and choosing when to use feedback in its entirety, when to use suggestions as a guide to ask for peer assistance and additional critique, and when to ignore the feedback. One group questioning the best method to provide viewers with supplemental information solicited teacher feedback, feedback from other groups, and talked through the options as a group coming up with a new solution that incorporated elements of feedback from several sources. Interestingly, their choices were not made by whether or not the feedback was from an expert, novice, or mentor, but whether the suggestions fit with the larger message they wanted to convey in their final product.

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