Bridge 2001-12 Project:

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***Focusing on Aesthetics While Keeping the Camera Focused***

I was drawn to the early quotation highlighted by Arlene on our welcome packets from the CAT book. It states, *“The type of assessment most likely to improve teaching and learning is conducted by faculty to answer questions they themselves have formulated in response to their own teaching”* (*Classroom Assessment Techniques*, p. 9). With this in mind, I have formulated my own question:

**How can I more effectively integrate early-semester aesthetics lessons into the final film work students produce?**

I teach a documentary production class in which students, during the first half of the semester, view and critique works by other directors. We do spend a considerable amount of time at the beginning of the class discussing shot composition, lighting, focal length, foreground, background, and other factors for designing a shot. We discuss how the speed of a shot can elicit certain emotions from the viewer. We also cover how post-production editing is used to generate mood and a sense of pace in a film. These discussions are tied to content only in the sense of determining what the aesthetic should be based on what the subject matter is. We concentrate heavily on how to create a look. Unfortunately, when students go into the field to shoot, they often pay these lessons short shrift while their attention is placed on technical issues.

**ONE-SENTENCE SUMMARIES**

After hearing from Jonathan Yavelow about his use of the one-sentence summary CAT in his science class, I decided to try the same strategy. I therefore gave students the following assignment:

**Summarize for me in one sentence what this class is about for its students.**

However, I was disappointed at the lack of inspiring replies:

“It is about learning how to make films.”

“This class is about learning how to tell stories using cameras.”

“We’re supposed to make a documentary and it isn’t supposed to be boring.”

“This class is about learning how to look at documentary films from a bunch of different perspectives.”

I realized that students were not prepared to think about the more detailed discipline-specific aspects of the course, and I considered ways to help them do so.My proposal for spring 2012 - Teaching the same class (Advanced Field Production):

I want to strengthen two main areas of my instruction:

1. Modeling better and worse examples of the work I require.
2. Breaking down complex assignments into components and assessing performance at each step.

**Modeling better and worse examples of the work I require.**

I didn’t realize until I reflected upon this that I show students examples of only the best work. It seemed intuitive to examine the work of great filmmakers to show students the “how-to.” I have been neglecting showing them poor work. In my lectures I want to incorporate these examples and interweave them with works I consider high-level. I will show them to the students and determine what they like and don’t like about the aesthetics of the films.

There is no shortage of good film work to examine, so that part of the class will stay similar. I will start to build a list of what I consider poorly produced or poorly conceived films and interject them into the portion of class where we critique films. I will attempt to draw from the students what they like or do not like about the aesthetics of a film and, based on their responses, help them develop more expert criteria for both judging and creating films.

**Breaking down complex assignments into components and assessing performance at each step.**

The way the class is structured now, students work on one “big” film. All the production for the semester is aimed toward this final project. Students shoot, and I meet with them to go over footage - but most of the grade for the class comes down to the final film.

I have come to realize that since film production is very process-oriented, my teaching strategies should reflect that process. I have decided to help students become more focused on each of the subcategories in each of the three major areas I cover and how they all work together in the final product:

Pre-production: Organizing shooting, landing interviews, logistics, equipment preparation, legal issues.

Production: Camera work, lighting, sound.

Post-production: Editing, color-correction, audio sweetening, graphics, resolution, formatting.

I will break these areas down into more focused lessons so that students can apply the negative and positive things they have gleaned from the films we explore in class.