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## Digital Video Cameras for Brainstorming and Outlining: The Process and Potential

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### Abstract

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This *Voices from the Field* paper presents methods and participant-exemplar data for integrating digital video cameras into the writing process across postsecondary literacy contexts. The methods and participant data are part of an ongoing action-based research project systematically designed to bring research and theory into practice for adult, non-native speakers of English in pre-college writing courses. However, as can be seen in the participant video data, transcripts, and essay-writing data, the methods and theories can be applied beyond the current research and teaching context. Relatively recent concepts in learning, development, and semiotics, specifically our species-unique ability to read the intentions of others, which forms the basis for imitation, guide this approach. We intentionally provide online links to participant video and raw text data to take advantage of 21st Century digital data-sharing options, in order to facilitate transparency and public ownership of data, findings, and directions for further research.

**Key words:** digital video cameras; joint attentional frames; pointing gestures; semiotics; language acquisition

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Often we encounter basic writing and composition students who sit frozen in front of a computer screen, and we ask them, “What’s wrong?” The answer is usually, “I don’t know where to start” or “Nothing; I’m just thinking.” As a response to these problems, we provided instructors with a set of flexible steps to use digital video cameras, and utilized relatively recent work in learning, development, and semiotics (Tomasello, 2003; Van Lier, 2004) in order to engage students in the brainstorming and outlining steps of the writing process. A parallel purpose was to guide adult language learners in pre-college literacy courses with a fluid and multimodal approach to literacy (Kress, 2003), helping students to *chunk* language (i.e. four to seven-word clusters) across different modes (e.g. poster- paper; video recordings; writing on computer screens; audio), to understand the way students emphasized one specific interpretation of meaning over another. The strategy and data presented in this *Voices from the Field* paper comes from our initial exploratory steps to ground the research in an action-research perspective (Stringer, 2014). Our overall goal is to involve the language/literacy teaching and learning community in the research process by disseminating the method and some of the data during the early stages of the ongoing data collection and implementation. We first present a broad theoretical framework, followed by the use of web links to video-recorded episodes of participants using these methods, transcripts of their speech, and a writing sample juxtaposed with a transcription from one of the cases.

### **Creating Joint Attentional Scenes and Pointing as Foundations for Learning and Communication**

According to Tomasello (2003), much of what guides human learning and development is our species-unique ability to read the intentions and mental states of others; part of this process he describes as *Joint Attentional Frames*. To use this concept in a classroom context, a Joint Attentional Frame can be described as an episode of two or more participants *pointing* (directing an *other’s* attention) in some manner to a third concrete or abstract entity, creating a triadic communicative space. Tomasello (2003) described an adult coming into an infant’s room with a diaper in his hands, and the infant followed the adult’s gaze to the diaper. The baby looked at the diaper and adult, could read the adult’s intentions, and could read the context that involved *changing the diaper*. Now imagine the adult coming into the room with a toy duck. The baby would read the intention of the adult and sequence of events as *playing with the toy duck*. This basic process continues throughout life, extends to mental states, such as understanding an *other’s* grief, sadness, happiness (Keysers & Gazzola, 2009), and increases complexity levels as our sign systems and the various ways we engage others become more layered and nuanced (Tomasello, 2003).

In another example, Tomasello (2003) described a scene at a train station, where a traveler did not know the local language. To paraphrase this example, suppose an American tourist was sitting in a train station in China, and he turned to a Chinese person who does not speak English and started to ask about train schedules, ticket prices, and how long it would take to reach a specific destination. The Chinese speaker probably would not understand very much. However, suppose the tourist went over to the ticket booth, asked these same questions to a ticket agent who could not speak English, and *pointed* to a schedule, a wrist watch, and pulled out money to pay for the ticket (Goodwin, 2003; Kita, 2003; McNeill, 2005). Through the pointing to concrete and abstract third entities, a Joint Attentional Frame forms, allowing the ticket-booth attendant to understand the tourist’s intentions and related meaning.

In the current action-research study, students create Joint Attentional Frames as they combine speech, pointing gestures (i.e. deictic gestures), and poster-size visuals (see Case A and Case C data) in short video compositions. Initially, students design the video as a construct for learning the writing processes of brainstorming and outlining; then they bring together the triadic of speech, the visual, and their acts of concretely and abstractly referring to the chunks of language on the video to create a communicative event. The student, the professor, and other students create and share Joint Attentional Frames throughout the process; the finished video becomes documentation for students to use in evaluating their creation of thesis statements and main ideas that explicitly relate to the thesis.

### **Signification and Mediation**

Another integral feature of these communicative/cognitive episodes are the processes of *Signification* and *Mediation*, which form the Vygotskian approach used throughout the teaching and research process covered here. Signification, broadly speaking, is the activity of assigning meaning to ourselves and the world around us (Peirce, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, the infant mentioned earlier would eventually assign the word “duck” to the toy the adult brought, and then learn to assign the same word to live ducks. Some day she would assign the meaning to *context* and language usage when someone yells “duck” while a crane moves heavy equipment overhead on a building construction site.

Mediation is the use of concrete and abstract tools to monitor and regulate human thought and activity (see Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998; 2007). In the example with the infant, the diaper was a salient part of the communicative event, and the duck and diaper became important tools to mediate concrete activity and abstract meaning. Similar examples of mediation occurred with the tourist at the Chinese train station; the tourist used the watch and schedule to mediate meaning and intentionality.

Humans are tool users, language is a tool to mediate meaning, and language is a semiotic system inseparable from human thought and activity (Peirce, 1991; Tomasello, 2003; Van Lier, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998, 2007). This broad theoretical framework foregrounds signification and mediation as identifiable processes that shape communicative events and literacy learning. This perspective, further informed by Tomasello’s (2003) proposal that humans enact Joint Attentional Scenes, is the foundation of our action-research.

### **Directions for Integrating Digital Video into the Writing Process**

Increasing communication skills, specifically writing, by using multi-modal resources and student-created Joint Attentional Scenes, is the goal of the action-research project. In previous lessons, we provided the adult language learners in the pre-college literacy course with an extensive review of the basics of academic writing, including the development of thesis statements along with supporting detail paragraphs and conclusions. Although some may argue that writing should not be formulaic, for the purposes of introducing adult non-native English speakers to academic writing, we have confined the lesson to production of the standard five-paragraph essay. After we had students choose writing prompts from a local State Regents’

website (the course final exam requires students to answer those prompts in a five-paragraph essay design), we introduced the video brainstorming and outlining process used in the study.

The template in Appendix A guides students through the process. First, students brainstorm supporting ideas for answering the prompt, and then, using chunks of language, complete the supporting ideas section of the template. From these supporting ideas, students create topic-sentence chunks, and finally, a draft of a thesis statement and an introductory hook.

After completing the template, we show students a model video of a visual and how the ideas are presented (Case A's video models this process). Imitating this model, students move their chunks of text from the template to poster-paper. During this sequence, they are strongly encouraged to revise hooks and thesis statements for any grammar, punctuation, or overall-meaning error. In our experience, it takes at least one class period to create the visuals and at least one day to record and archive videos for instructor and student review.

We constructed the entire sequence to emphasize an inductive approach to creating thesis statements where students learn to build their essays using chunks of supporting details rather than finding supporting details that may or may not fit a thesis statement written first. The goal of this process is to prompt academic English students, particularly in student success courses, to better understand and manipulate chunks of language across different modalities, to organize ideas, and create meaning.

### **Example Data**

For this *View from the Field* paper, the raw exemplar data (arranged from top to bottom, at [http://transitional-literacy.org/?page\\_id=9783](http://transitional-literacy.org/?page_id=9783) . The password is **rabbit58**.) illustrates the process and potential for integrating digital video cameras into the writing process. Because of the wide array of stakeholders with any classroom-based technology implementation, the collaborative and recursive nature of action-research is essential. Part of this collaborative stance is to disseminate early progress reports of implementation. The two selected cases below, chosen from a limited initial pool of participants, exemplify how the process and potential can unfold differently.

### **The Overall Study, Case A, Case C, and the Context**

This specific approach to brainstorming and outlining has been developed and used over several semesters at this and other institutions with English as a first or additional language in pre-college courses, but not under IRB protocol. Case A and Case C were the first participants to illustrate this particular activity. Case A and Case C were purposeful case samples.

The two cases presented, Case A and Case C, were from a very limited pool of participants who used this specific approach for video cameras. Overall, approximately 20 students from several student success courses chose to have their video and literacy data archived and used for our research. We chose the case letters in the order the data was transcribed and archived; Case B was from a group using a different digital video recording procedure, and so was not included here.

### Data from Case A

Case A, although a non-native speaker of English, was enrolled in a pre-college writing course for native speakers at the time of the data collection. We paid him \$10.00 an hour as a volunteer participant. We recruited him specifically to work one-on-one with the lead author to provide a reference case to compare to other cases during this first phase of the research and perhaps beyond. He knew that we would use his data as a model for others. This one-on-one interaction allowed for closer guidance with the student about the procedure, although, of course, with the acknowledgement of all the bias created due to the circumstances. Nonetheless, as can be seen in the data presented here, his work with the process is informative.

As readers have access to the video data ([http://transitional-literacy.org/?page\\_id=9783](http://transitional-literacy.org/?page_id=9783) Password: **rabbit58**), and as this is a *Voices from the Field* report on our classroom experiences thus far, our aim is to leave this data open to interpretation as much as possible. However, to aid the reader in relating theory to practice, several moments in Case A's data are worth introducing as reference points to contrast with other cases. Case A illustrates bringing together speech, a visual, and the act of pointing to create context and meaning for the small camera and imagined audience he is trying to reach with his writing, thus creating the same broad contextual structure emphasized in Tomasello's (2003) descriptions of Joint Attentional Scenes. In the video, Case A presented his main ideas and supporting details to answer the question, "Is it better for a leader to be loved or feared? Explain." In one particularly informative moment in the video, he pointed to and read one chunk "a country's economy will never be strong," then finished by combining this thought with another chunk near the top of the visual "If a country's political leader is feared by someone or something" (see the video recording around 1:23-1:26). Throughout the video, Case A clearly pointed to, explained his supporting details, and explicitly related different chunks of text to his thesis statement in statements such as: "My best umm supporting detail is," "because he's scared," and "he is not going to be respected" (time 1:22 to 1:43).

### Data from Case C

Case C was a student in a pre-college writing course for non-native speakers and learned the digital video camera strategy during class time as part of her coursework. She was also one of many students we have met over the years who emphasized that she did not know where or how to start writing when presented with a prompt.

Case C used the digital video camera strategy to brainstorm and outline her answer to the question, "Should prison inmates be allowed to take college courses? Why or why not?" Her data provides a useful contrast to the data from Case A. One of the main differences with Case C was that she did not follow the directions for explaining which supporting detail is the strongest; as often happens the first time through the procedures, students will simply read their information from the visual without following the directions to make their rhetorical decisions explicit. However, Case C illustrated how her intentions became clear across modalities as she moved from the visual to the video recording, and finally, to a draft of the essay. Reading from her poster, she presented her thesis as, "...prisoners should be allowed to take College Courses to have a second chance to have a change in their life." Case C's thesis remained the same on her written draft. However, even though Case C did not articulate the type of reasons prompted by

the template as Case A did, she strongly demonstrated the revisions to her language chunks from the visual to her speech and her written essay. For example, during her reading of the visual she stated that her "...second body paragraph presents a subtopic of a change is needed. They will learn discipline; they-it-will and change for a better actions and a better way of living life." This theme of change and the chunks presented on the visual were further transformed in the first two sentences of the corresponding body-paragraph two of the essay: "The ability to receiving education can change behaviors into the prisoners mind. Allowing the prisoners a chance to go to school or get education is like giving them a chance they might never had in the real world due to the world situations."

Similar to Case A, the data from Case C revealed how a crucial step of explaining abstract relationships brought the concept and creation of Joint Attentional Scenes to the forefront, emphasizing the need for an intention-reading process. Also, the contrasts in this missing step made it difficult to assess the mastery of evaluating evidence, which could be glimpsed more directly from Case A's data rather than Case C's. However, despite these weaknesses in the data from Case C, by looking backwards and forwards across the chunks produced on the visual, the video presentation, and the essay, we could indirectly assess what Case C might have determined to be the most important details of her oral presentation. Both cases were strong reference points and examples of looking across modalities for understanding how participants were able to move from initial question prompts, signifying one chunk of information as linked, to understanding how some main ideas are stronger than others, using a visual, speech, and pointing to mediate meaning for an audience.

### Conclusion

In this *Voices from the Field* paper, we have intended to share the process and potential of integrating digital video cameras into the essay writing process, using the triadic of *oral speech*, a *visual*, and the *act of pointing*. As discussed, Case A and C share intentions and mental states through the act of pointing at third entities, much like the infant and adult or the traveler in Tomasello's (2003) descriptions of Joint Attentional Frames. The raw exemplar data expresses the process and the potential for further action-based research and use of digital video cameras across the college literacy curriculum.

Disseminating the data so early in the initial stages of the study allows us to use the access to information and resources provided by online open-source journals and digital technology to more actively involve stakeholders in the process. These stakeholders include: future student-participants, who will have an informed voice in proposing instruction and assessment adaptations to digital video lessons; other content-area teachers at the secondary and postsecondary levels, who may find ways to implement our activities, comment on our research approach, and provide us with advice for adjustments; and administrators, who will gain a clearer understanding of how different technological resources can be placed across the curriculum. Overall, we are entering an entirely new realm of making ongoing action-research accessible to all stakeholders in language and literacy work, specifically in the field of implementing digital video technology across the literacy curriculum. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to literacy research and writing education is an important first step in engaging technology-oriented students who no longer benefit from single-mode approaches to academic literacy outcomes.

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## Appendix A

**The Form Students fill in and then use to guide them in the video.**

Hook: \_\_\_\_\_

Thesis: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Topic Paragraph One:

Supporting Detail One:

Supporting Detail Two:

Supporting Detail Three:

2. Topic Paragraph Two:

Supporting Detail One:

Supporting Detail Two:

Supporting Detail Three:

3. Topic Paragraph Three:

Supporting Detail One:

Supporting Detail Two:

Supporting Detail Three:



**Directions for the Video**

1. Introduce yourself; use a pseudonym (a fake name; mine is rabbit)
2. Express a Hook related to your topic (a question; a quote; a statistic; a unique scenario; a unique observation).
3. Say, “Today I’m going to present the overall topic of \_\_\_\_\_
4. My first body paragraph presents the subtopic of \_\_\_\_\_
5. An important supporting detail in this paragraph related to the thesis is \_\_\_\_\_  
It is related to the thesis because \_\_\_\_\_
6. My second body paragraph presents a subtopic of \_\_\_\_\_
7. An important supporting detail related to the thesis is \_\_\_\_\_  
It is related to the thesis because \_\_\_\_\_
8. My third body paragraph presents the subtopic of \_\_\_\_\_  
It is related to the thesis because \_\_\_\_\_

The thesis is: READ THE THESIS

The Hook is: READ THE HOOK