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Enhancing Geographic Learning and Literacy Through Filmmaking

Christina E. Dando and Jacob J. Chadwick

ABSTRACT

In this media-saturated society, students need to think more critically about the media they encounter and that they are producing. Through filmmaking, students can link geographic theory and the real world, bridging the distance from readings/lectures/ discussions to the geography on the ground, making the abstract concrete. But constructing films also enhances students' understanding of the communications they consume and the communications they construct (films, television, podcasts, YouTube, etc.). In this article, a student and instructor discuss the making of short films or videos in geography classes and how it can enhance both geographic education and media literacy.

Key Words: media literacy, filmmaking, fieldwork, visualization, videography

INTRODUCTION

In fall 2011 Christina Dando taught a seminar in cultural geography at the University of Nebraska-Omaha with a service learning component, focused on the Omaha neighborhood of 24th and Lake streets. At one time known for its diverse community and lively nightclubs, this neighborhood has struggled for decades. Our nonprofit partner in the class, Omaha's Urban Neighborhoods (OUN), works with communities to promote understanding and stimulate redevelopment. Student class projects combined the needs of the nonprofit partner, students' interests and ideas, and academic parameters. Two students, Jacob Chadwick and Gabriel Pereda, decided to make a documentary film capturing the neighborhood residents' memories of their community and their desires for its future. The voices they captured reminisced on dancing in clubs, on Easter parades, on people watching on a Sunday afternoon—on a thriving, prosperous, lively community, “North Omaha's Dreamland.” Their lens captured the landscape of today's 24th and Lake, a mix of struggling and boarded-up businesses and homes and empty lots. And they captured voices longing for restaurants and groceries where there are now none, for a better perception of their neighborhood, for a return of vibrancy to their community.

Educators have long taught using films as a visual aid and as a medium to be read and analyzed. We argue that having students make videos in geography classes enhances the learning of geography and promotes media literacy. Lukinbeal and Craine (2009, 177–178) write:

Media is not only a technology of meaning construction but, more important, it is a technology of information transfer. Media functions as an act of communication. It is a chain of practices and processes by which geographical information is gathered, geographical facts are ordered and our imaginative geographies are constructed.

It is essential that our students learn not only to interpret media but also to create this work themselves. Through media creation, they gain insight into the process of media production as well as gain experience in crafting and communicating information in forms that circulate widely outside of

geography, especially video and film. This is important not only for media literacy but also for geographic literacy.

While we are using the word film, we are really talking about student-produced videos. Thanks to the simplification of technology, most Westerners have access to some form of video recorder—be it a smartphone, a digital camera with video capabilities, or a camcorder—and many have made some form of videos (Buckingham, Pini, and Willett 2007, 188).¹ However, we want to distinguish between home movies or amateur videos (suggesting in-the-moment) and what we call film here: a carefully crafted construct reflecting a particular reality (196). We use the word film consciously to distinguish between home videos and a project for a geography class calling for a thoughtful construction involving planning, filming, editing, and perhaps voice-over/narration.

Filmmaking is a valuable tool for teaching geography, tying together learner-centered education, critical pedagogy and literacies associated with geography, media, and information technologies. We review the relationship between media, fieldwork, and geographic education, before reflecting on our learning through filmmaking, from a student's perspective and from a professor's perspective.

FIELDWORK, VISUALIZATION AND FILMMAKING

Filmmaking is part of an old tradition of geography: producing visual representations of place. Today, we speak of geovisualization. We may immediately think of maps and geographic information systems but geographers have long employed topographic drawings, block diagrams, and photographs in our research and teaching (Fox 2005). As new communications technologies are developed, geographers have adapted them to our classrooms to show our students our world. A 1901 article suggests that geography teachers used the latest fads of cameras and bicycles to create lantern slides that could be used in teaching: "With these two machines the teacher of Geography can do some good solid work" (Carter 1901, 27). Geographers quickly adopted film, with the first documented film being shown to a geography class in 1901 (Fox 2005, 9). Today, teachers often have students read movies for their geography assignments, evaluating the landscapes created in films and how they compare to reality (real versus reel), but this exercise does not engage with the medium itself as a form of communication (Lukinbeal and Craine 2009, 176–177). Media permeates our classrooms in the forms of slides, PowerPoint presentations, maps, films, or video clips but we are so close to our visual representations we forget they are forms of media in their own right. Just as our students need to be taught to read and create maps, so too do they need to be taught to interpret, use, and create media (176).

Geography teachers have long had students make maps in classes, from kindergarten through higher grade levels. But we seldom have students explore geography's other media as part of pedagogy (for exceptions, see Kolka 1967, Miller 1974, Sidaway 2002, and Sanders 2007). Having students produce forms of landscape representation (maps, sketches, photographs, and videos) brings together two essential elements of geographic education, fieldwork and the visual, while providing an opportunity for them to critically reflect on media.

Historically, geography has been a mixture of explorers writing up their accounts of travels in faraway places (fieldwork) and compilations of such accounts into cohesive regional accounts (gazetteers, maps, atlases, etc.). Early Islamic geographers such as Al-Muqaddasi (ca. 945–1000) and Ibn Batuta (ca. 1100–1165) were heralded for their firsthand accounts of their world. In the West Alexander von Humboldt's fieldwork in South America was the cornerstone of his prolific writing, serving as an example to other

explorers and naturalists of his time (Mathewson 2001, 215–216). As the academic discipline of geography developed, fieldwork was viewed as an essential element, especially given its physical geography focus. Through fieldwork geographers could see examples of what they were studying, carry out their own research (surveying, measuring), sketch, photograph, and/or map the landscape, and, most significantly, experience what it meant to be a geographer and to be in place. As cultural geography developed, fieldwork was also seen as essential. Carl Sauer (1956, 296) emphasized the importance of observation and fieldwork in his 1956 Association of American Geographers presidential address:

[G]eography is first of all knowledge gained by observation, that one orders by reflection and reinspection the things one has been looking at, and that from what one has experienced by intimate sight comes comparison and synthesis. In other words the principal training of the geographer should come, wherever possible, by doing fieldwork.

Over the past fifty years fieldwork has fallen from favor, given less and less time in geography classrooms, especially as computer-based fields such as remote sensing, GIS (geographic information systems), and Web-based research and mapping have been added to our curriculum, and budget cuts have forced us to stay closer to home (leading to virtual fieldtrips). But fieldwork has so much to offer our students that we need to revisit the practice:

Teaching geography well requires that we make concepts real. Students understand even very complex, nonlinear ideas when they can see how they resonate in their lives. Likewise, they appreciate geography if they can “see” it, relate it to their life worlds and connect the theory with practices. . . . Seeing geography’s “realness” is enormously valuable. In addition, when students see what they are studying in the world around them, they gain an appreciation for what goes on in the classroom. (Sanders 2007, 192)

As geography instructors pursue methods of active learning, we are returning to fieldwork as a means to involve students in the learning process, provide hands-on experience of geography in action, and connect the academic concepts with their world. Filmmaking can facilitate this process. Whether the fieldtrip is near (your neighborhood) or far, adding a creative component such as photography or videography can greatly facilitate students’ learning (Lukinbeal et al. 2007; di Palma 2009; Jarvis and Dickie 2010; France and Wakefield 2011; Mavroudi and Jöns 2011). While we might think of photography or films as passive, the act of producing photographs or creating a video are dynamic and engage students in learner-centered pedagogy that forces students to actively construct and represent geographic meaning about people and places (Sanders 2007).

Through filmmaking, students must think about what images they want to include and exclude in order to construct the video that meets the expectations of the assignment and that also meets their expectations, resulting in thoughtful landscape observation, engagement with the landscape and possibly its residents, planning in order to get the images that they require, editing to refine their project, and critical thinking and reflection to create a commentary for their project (Mavroudi and Jöns 2011, 595). While there are always technological aspects (learning the equipment and editing software) and the possibilities of objectification that can lead to negative outcomes, the learning that can come from this process can outweigh the negatives. Technical issues can open the door to discussions of the importance of process over results and objectification can lead to discussions of representation, ethics,

and positionality in doing geographic fieldwork in general. With our net generation students, the lessons learned through such a process, we believe, are increasingly important in our media-saturated Western world. In fact, it is argued that not only is use of geomedia important to the development of critical thinking skills, but we also need to train our students to think critically about geomedia: “. . . in order to make the most of geomedia, students should be supported in developing media competence and literacy, enabling them to keep pace with the continuously emerging dimensions of context brought about by increasing power and accessibility of tools for imaging (virtual) spaces” (Hof, Hetzel, and Telaar 2012, 247).

ADVENTURES IN FILMMAKING IN OMAHA

We [article authors] came to film as classwork in a roundabout way. Christina Dando did not set out to have her students do film, it was really a result of having an open mind when it came to students’ projects, encouraging creative projects, and having the right student come along. In a Geographies of the Media class Christina taught in fall 2010, Jacob Chadwick was one of the first to take on a creative project, writing a blog. But Jacob’s first foray in academic filmmaking came in a graduate seminar in cultural geography (fall 2011). This class was Christina’s first attempt at a service learning class and involved six graduate students working with a nonprofit group, Omaha’s Urban Neighborhoods (OUN). OUN works to stimulate the revitalization, both cultural and economic, of older neighborhood commercial districts in Omaha, such as South 24th Street (old stockyards neighborhood, today predominantly Hispanic) and North 24th and Lake St. (old immigrant neighborhood, today predominantly black, low-income) (Fig. 1). As part of the academic work for the class, we read extensively on landscape, including work on landscape and race and on spectral geography.² OUN’s director, Vince Furlong, provided us with a wish list of project ideas and Jacob, collaborating with another graduate student, Gabriel Pereda, decided to tackle the topic of landscape and oral histories of residents and business owners by making a film. Jacob and Gabriel produced a thirteen-minute video that was shown to the class and to Furlong (Figs. 2 and 3). Jacob then took the video to the 2012 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in New York City, participating in a “Geographies of the Media” session focused on film. His video can be viewed on his Vimeo site.³

In exploring our learning through filmmaking, we sat down and interviewed each other on August 30, 2012, in the conference room of the Geography/Geology Department at the University of Nebraska–Omaha. This interview was then transcribed and edited for the sake of clarity and to focus our comments on the pedagogical importance of this form of teaching and learning.⁴ Using this approach, we found ourselves talking about teaching, learning, geography, and filmmaking in ways we had not previously, even though Jacob has taken a number of my classes and we talk regularly as advisor and advisee.

INTERVIEW/CONVERSATION

CD (CHRISTINA DANDO): As a geographer, how did you get into videography?

JC (JACOB CHADWICK): In the past I’ve done some work with video, and then this class [cultural geography seminar] came up and I had an opportunity to explore it even more.

The filmmaking process was definitely more engaging than the types of projects usually assigned in a geography class. To start, Gabe and I scanned the neighborhood for weeks, taking pictures, talking to

people about the possibility of a film, and creating a comfort in the community for both the residents and ourselves (Fig. 4). Once all the filming took place, the editing was an experience all its own. With a collective fifteen hours of editing, we did our share of learning, because it wasn't just making the edits, it was learning the software and crafting the film. Fifteen hours of footage to twelve minutes in the final film—really makes you reconsider writing a paper.

I've since taken a film editing class and a screenwriting class and have noticed that there is so much geography involved in creating and writing a film. Every scene is defined by its locations. Characters are defined by where they are from and their cultural personalities. Plot can be secondary to geography. When I make a film as a geographer I create a story first by defining its locations and characters, then work to interweave a plot line throughout. This process works with both narrative and documentary films.

Compared to traditional geography assignments, this project allowed us, as researchers, to have direct access with our sources. Papers lead researchers to books, journals, maps, and other data sources, and the answers to further questions must be found elsewhere. Using film as a research method allows us to ask those questions directly with the source. When describing landscape it was easier, because we could just show it instead of trying to describe with words a struggling and boarded-up neighborhood in need of revitalization. It was also a break from traditional assignments, which was relieving. Learning a new form of problem solving was both scary and invigorating.

CD: What do you feel you have gained from your geographic videography, as compared to traditional geography assignments?

JC: I felt that through producing a documentary film I was forced to engage with cultural geography fieldwork in a new way: I had to engage with the people in the study area and had to consider how best to tell their story. After months of walking the neighborhood, we found ourselves asking each other different questions as to the sense of place of this neighborhood. Prior to working on this project we only associated with what we saw from our car window, but after spending months walking and talking with the community we were engaged and had a sense of the place. Part of the problem of getting to know this neighborhood is that much of the activity takes place inside the buildings rather than on the sidewalks and street. Due to the negative perception of the neighborhood and its association with random gun violence, an outsider might feel reluctant to walk the sidewalks, or enter one of the buildings. We had a sense of the community after walking the streets, eating at the restaurants, drinking at the bars, going to events, the museums, getting to know some of the people, and getting to know the history of the neighborhood. Our knowledge and experience of the community really made a difference in the construction of the film's narrative.

JC: As an instructor, what are your thoughts on the value of videography in higher education?

CD: I've always offered options with projects but not a lot of people chose to do them. I see film and other creative works as different ways of learning and presenting information. And that they're just as worthy as an academic exercise. I believe you can have academic rigor. I knew when you guys were making the film that you were putting more hours in than anybody else. I knew that you were going to film for hours and hours and spend time with people. And that it would come down to twelve minutes but that twelve minutes was going to be the tip of an iceberg for the amount of time and effort that you put into it, winnowing through that material, but also spending so much time in the community. In the

service learning class, I observed a learning difference between the student projects involving community interviews, such as yours, and more traditional research projects involving library research. The library researchers came away with a very different sense of place than you did. The time you spent in the community resulted in a more nuanced community portrait and greater understanding and empathy for the challenges they face. For me, this was incredibly important and, in the future, I will have all students in similar classes do projects that take them into the community, such as film or photography projects. Such projects require students to actively create their own representation of places, forcing them to reflect on preconceived notions of the location as well as the constructions they are creating.

With academics, it's very easy to lock ourselves away in ivory towers and write about others, but to go out and do a field project where you spend hours talking to people, spending time with people, asking them about what they want for their community. . . That is totally worthwhile in my mind. Perhaps you won't have this very deep analytical section but there is analysis, as you listen to the voices and as you figure out how to best tell their story. It's just a different way of doing it. You're not doing content analysis, you're not doing statistical analysis, but there is analysis there. And crafting it and putting it together is a different form of communication. There is a lot of writing there, you may not see it per se, but the writing is there.

CD: How have your experiences with videography advanced your education?

JC: I definitely advanced my education, though I don't think that all of what I learned made it through the film. However, I do think our field experience came to fruition during our classroom discussions. It was pretty much the perfect classroom, because we got to experience exactly what we were discussing, in particular the haunting discussions and the spectral landscapes. That really hit home for me, specifically within that neighborhood, because there are so many dormant buildings there, that it seemed similar to what we were reading.⁵

Videography allows me to take a complicated idea that I have a hard time clearly explaining in written form and create a visual story around it. This certainly helps me understand the geography concepts better, but also hopefully the audience understands geography better too. By walking and exploring the landscape my personal geographic literacy is improved and I hope that through the created film the audience improves their geographic understanding of the location as well.

CD: What would you recommend for instructors or students who are thinking about attempting videography or incorporating a videography project in a class?

JC: Try, fail, repeat. You just got to do it. And actually, if you are going to do it with a bigger class, I'd say do it with partners because it makes it ten times easier. It was helpful that there was another person there, specifically being able to feed off one another when talking to people. I think just doing it by yourself might turn people away, especially if they're not, if they're new to the medium and not used to looking at a camera.

JC: So you've had a pretty much open mind since I've known you. How has that helped or hurt the classroom experience? And has it ever backfired?

CD: I don't have any hesitation even though I know it's not going to work every time. I know that there might be technical difficulties. The very first time I attempted more creative stuff in a class, one of the three group projects did not gel, the group did not work well together, so their project flopped.

If anything, I am more interested in doing these types of creative projects, which takes the learning and puts it into the students' hands. In your (Jacob's) filmmaking, you had sound issues on your first film and I know that is frustrating for you, but you learned from it. The next time you made a film for one of my classes, it was even better. And you continue to improve. I see the learning going on, I see the learning about filmmaking, but I also see the improved communication, the improved storytelling, and, yes, even the improved geography. So that's what comes through.

JC: Why do you think higher education geographers are hesitant to incorporate media projects in their classes?

CD: I've been thinking about this as I've been reading up on what's been published about geography and film. People have been arguing for geographers working with film since film started. And there have been geographers that have advocated for using photography as both a field method and as a teaching method beginning over a hundred years ago [Carter 1901]. So why don't we do it?

When I think about why I haven't pushed this more in my own teaching, it's all about the learning curve. It's a matter of how much knowledge do I have to have as an instructor in order to lead the students in doing these sorts of things? I've never made a film, so I have to confess my ignorance. We have to admit that we don't know everything. But with the new technology, it's becoming easier and easier. And our students are raised with this new technology; most of them have cellphones capable of video and have already made short videos. Okay, maybe I haven't played with it that much but my students have.

I truly did not recognize the educational power of filmmaking in a geography class until your [Jacob's] projects. When I saw the difference in learning in a single class between those students who did film and other assignments that took them in the community and those students who did archival work, I was sold. So I'm more and more willing to try this and I think that more geographers should because, in our media-saturated age, this is something that our students are constantly exposed to and they need to be able to think critically about media. Filmmaking is one way our students can both actively reflect on how media shapes our world views and reflect on how geographers also shape world views.

If we go back to the theme of media literacy, you learn so much by doing rather than passively watching. As you said earlier, as you have made films and have learned about filmmaking and about screenwriting, you see the geography all the way through it. If students start to make films or take photographs in the context of a geography class, they're going to be applying their geographical eye, their geographical imagination, in a way that they really haven't before. I think that we need to do that, absolutely. But I think that the fear over the technology and over the instructor's not having enough experience themselves makes geographers reluctant to do it, although I know that there are people out there that do it—just not very big numbers. Yes, it is scary venturing into areas where we don't have a lot of experience, but this is where we all learn, students and teachers alike.

CONCLUSION

When we, Christina and Jacob, began that service learning seminar in 2011, neither of us knew where this adventure would take us. In the course of the seminar, the educational experience that Jacob and his project partner Gabriel had making their film was markedly different than the experiences of students doing traditional research projects. Christina learned of the pedagogical power of a structured film project. Jacob discovered how difficult it was to create a well-rounded landscape visualization as a film, but also how rewarding the end product could be.

Filmmaking is a powerful learning tool and much can be gained by having students create films in geography classes. Students gain enhanced geographic knowledge as they apply concepts they have learned and practice communicating them to others. They gain enhanced media literacy as they learn what goes into creating a short film, allowing them to reflect on how the media shapes their understanding of places and peoples. Both geographic education and media literacy lead to enhanced critical thinking skills. Even if the videos are not perfect, learning happens. Geography and media have been intertwined in our lives and in our classrooms for at least the last one hundred years (Dando 2013). It is time we actively engage with media and acknowledge the important role both geography and media play in shaping our geographic imaginations. Students making films is one way to educate students about how media shapes our geographies and about how they too are creators of both geographies and medias. Ultimately, all that is required to do film projects in geography classes is a leap of faith for both students and the instructor.

NOTES

1. Many campuses also have video cameras available for check-out through their libraries or communication or journalism departments. But a lot can be done with smartphones, including editing. There is free or low-cost editing software for editing your smartphone videos and there are online directions available such as “How to Shoot Great Video with Your Smartphone” on the Popular Mechanics Web site: <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/how-to/tips/how-to-shoot-great-video-with-your-smartphone> (accessed November 18, 2013).
2. Spectral geography can be defined as an examination of the essential spirit that inhabits a place and underlies its existence and character. Spectral geography seeks to illuminate “specific aspects of social life: aspects which appear to be not there, concealed yet important; aspects which seethe, acting on or meddling with present-day realities in a violent or disturbed manner; and finally, aspects that by seething, unsettle taken for granted realities. Haunting is not a value-neutral term: it highlights histories that cannot rest” (Shipley Coddington 2011, 747–748). See also, for example, Edensor 2008. The North 24th and Lake community is haunted by a history of late- 1960s riots and of violence that lingers in the area today.
3. Jacob’s film on North Omaha’s Dreamland can be accessed at: <https://vimeo.com/37317941> (accessed November 18, 2013). Part of Jacob’s learning experience was tied to adequate microphones and sound quality—the sound is poor on his North Omaha video and they had to add closedcaptioning. His second film done in a geography class was on the Nebraska Slow Food movement, <https://vimeo.com/41111993> (accessed November 18, 2013).
4. We have also elaborated on statements and integrated material from Jacob’s reflection paper on making the North 24th and Lake film.
5. Christina has students doing creative and/or service projects write short reflection papers in addition to

their projects. While writing, students reflect on their learning and connect their own work with coursework.

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Figure 1. Map of the Omaha metropolitan area. (Cartographer: Spencer Trowbridge.)



*Figure 2. Abandoned and boarded up house in the 24th and Lake Street neighborhood. North 24th Street, the heart of Omaha's African American community, was once known as the "Street of Dreams." (Still image from *North Omaha's Dreamland*, with permission of Gabriel Pereda and Jacob Chadwick.)*



*Figure 3. Martin Luther King Jr. Cornerstone Memorial on the northwest corner of 24th and Lake Streets. Public memorials and art fill empty lots where businesses and homes once stood. (Still image from *North Omaha's Dreamland*, with permission of Gabriel Pereda and Jacob Chadwick.)*



Figure 4. Jacob Chadwick at work. (Photograph courtesy of Jacob Chadwick).