

# YOU HOLD THE CAMERA NOW: AN ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY OF PRE-KINDERGARTEN TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE DESIGN

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This paper presents findings from a pilot research project called the Junior Audio-Video Club. Through an account of our experimental pedagogical approaches this paper aims to identify key insights and challenges to the pursuit of early childhood media arts education, and to explore the relationship between art practice and research.



*Student participants in the Junior AV Club collaborate on a video editing project. Copyright University of Southern California.*

“It’s like somebody telling a story, except it’s on a screen.” This observation about the relationship between movies and storytelling was made by a four-year-old student at the outset of a project called the Junior Audio-Video (AV) Club undertaken by a group of media arts scholars and practitioners at the Institute for Multimedia Literacy in the fall of 2009. A research and teaching unit within the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts, the Institute for Multimedia Literacy, or IML, is dedicated to promoting media literacy within networked cultures at all levels of education. The Junior AV Club, an ongoing action research project investigating how digital media tools facilitate learning for early

primary students within a pedagogical framework based on computational literacies, represents the IML's first foray into pre-K and early primary education. As an IML staff person and PhD student in Media Arts and Practice (iMAP) at USC, my role within the Junior AV Club has been that of curriculum designer, lead instructor and researcher. I am in the process of expanding the research goals of the project and making it the basis of my dissertation work.

This paper is an "in-progress" introduction to the project; it is not a comprehensive report of findings and conclusions as we have not yet reached that phase of the process. At this stage we are focused on a practical approach to developing classroom interventions and have yet to assess the outcomes of those interventions. I share our work at this phase as an example of how the processes and skills of an arts practice background may contribute to research endeavors.

The Junior AV Club was inspired by a 2009 evaluation of the Ready To Learn Initiative that found positive effects on the basic literacy skills of preschoolers when exposed to media rich educational materials. The IML partnered with a neighboring preschool and conducted a one-day workshop in digital storytelling and recombinative narrative with a group of 18 four- and five-year old students. The success of that pilot workshop led us to develop and implement a 10-week project in the spring of 2010.

Students came to the IML each week in groups of 10 for 90-minute sessions on transmedia digital storytelling. An early lesson dealt with still image production, analysis and categorization. Students learned to take photos using digital still cameras. Once students had their photos loaded onto IML computers, they each chose three pictures to arrange on a single page with a sentence of text (dictated to an adult) explaining their choices. Compositions included groupings based on color, personal preference, and the idea that the same thing can look very different depending on how close or far away the camera was when the picture was taken.

This lesson illustrates our pedagogical approach to the Junior AV Club in a number of ways. For one, it created an opportunity for practical media production skills in a context that promoted critical media literacy. Additionally, the language of visual literacy that we introduced to describe and categorize images tied in to the traditional literacy skills students were learning in their regular classroom, supporting concepts of patterning, seriation and classification. The activity also illustrated a common student relationship with technology: students expressed excitement about using digital cameras and shared anecdotes about their prior experiences using or observing such technologies in familial contexts.

Since completing that first 10-week session and reflecting upon our experience, we have gone on to conduct two more iterations of the Junior AV Club in the summers of 2010 and 2011. We refined our lessons and activities, expanded our approach to include computational literacies and game design alongside visual literacies and storytelling, and have focused as much on how we teach as what we teach. We strive to create a learning-rich environment facilitating challenge-based peer-driven inquiry where technology is a naturalized part of the landscape.

In the latest iteration of the Junior AV Club we examined how iPad tablet devices function as learning tools and encourage computational thinking. We found that iPads were useful for information recording and sharing between students just learning to read and write, and that well designed iPad apps could be effective models of abstract concepts such as computer programming. However, we found that many iPad apps encouraged single-user experience at the expense of group cohesion and we would like to see development of more apps that can support the creative learning activities of a defined group of local users, creating an effective virtual extension of classroom spaces and activities.

Technology in the classroom is not an answer in itself to the changing needs of educational systems. However, as the affordances of new technologies support novel structures of social interaction, skill sharing and network building, there are opportunities to re-imagine what teaching and learning look like. There is much positive work being done around these ideas, and I am particularly excited by the research, writing and pedagogical examples of Mizuko Ito, Douglas Thomas, John Seely Brown and Katie Salen, along with the field building efforts of the MacArthur foundation in the area of digital media and

learning. Within this investigative space I see a place for the research contributions of arts practitioners and educators, and offer some context about my own arrival within this community as an illustration.

When I first began making documentary video art, I learned by instinct and self-guided research. I later expanded my self-developed processes and skills with a formal arts practice education, earning an MFA in film directing and production from UCLA. But my richest learning experiences were those that I pursued on my own. As an arts educator, I strive to create circumstances in which students can discover and strengthen their own vision and creative process rather than presenting them with a predetermined set of rules.

I came to the research process of the Junior AV Club much as I did to the art practice process, working from a desire to do, to explore and to learn. This openness to experimentation carried over into my interactions with the students through a willingness to adapt our approach to their feedback and needs rather than try to mold them to a preconceived plan and concept of how an activity was supposed to go. This flexibility and openness to the reality unfolding in front of and around me has always been key to my successful creative experiences. We carried out our research like art practice, and it turned out that one of our main research goals was to learn how best to structure learning that way too. Moving forward with the project along the iterative feedback loops of an action research system, I hope to enlarge the Junior AV Club's community of collaborators, to incorporate more expertise and methodology from education research, and to develop functional tools and publications that can benefit communities beyond the laboratory space of the IML.

#### **References and Notes:**

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