Creating Video Vignettes to Enhance Urban Design Learning

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ABSTRACT

Most classroom instruction related to urban geography and design relies heavily on static photographic images that highlight form, but don’t necessarily engage the idea of function. Because of the relative ease of digital video editing and the portability of high-definition digital video cameras, using instructor-collected video in the classroom is less-demanding than in the past. This paper highlights how short video vignettes can better elucidate urban concepts and explains best practices in crafting educational objectives and professional video products.

Keywords: Design Learning, Urban Design, Urban Geography, Video Instruction, Video Vignettes, Visual Learning

INTRODUCTION

Being a photographer can easily be translated into assisting students learn to be observers of their world, which is a critical part of geographic inquiry (Gersmehl & Brown, 1992). As a geography student at universities through the 1990s, I encountered many slide shows in the classroom where the professor would explain matters like the physical landscapes of the northern Appalachian Mountains, vegetation of the Gila Semi-Desert, or the complexity of container shipping at the Port of Baltimore. The professor would weave a narrative about place, space, and nature-society relations as the slide carousel advanced. As I began to teach geographic concepts during the early 2000s, the slide projector had been replaced by PowerPoint slides where text and graphics conjoin in a less cumbersome manner. The images I would use to describe the cultural landscape of places like Los Angeles and Denver were beneficial, but had their limits. The images are frozen in time. If people are present in the scene, their actions can only be inferred from one image or a set of images. As some physical geographers have noted (Sawyer, Butler, & Curtis, 2010), the use of repeat photography is a great avenue for exploring landscape change, but what about the micro changes that happen every second within urban landscapes? The best option is to take students into the field and share the manner in which a geographer interprets the landscape, and wonderful opportunities to engage students in the field are noted within the literature (Lackstrom & Stroup, 2009; Strait, 2010). Yet, sometimes landscapes students need to experience are too far. Although photographs are very useful in engendering awareness of geographic form or the physical layout of a

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city (Knox & McCarthy, 2005), the idea of function can be quite nebulously be inferred by the observer. Function is defined as how people interact with urban form (Calthorpe & Fulton, 2001). How do people interact with the built environment? This depth of learning yearns for the capabilities of film.

Students in today’s classroom are expecting more media options because their lives are more significantly influenced by media of various kinds including: television, computer, music/audio devices, video games, and movies. In a 2009 study of 8-18 year olds in the United States, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that each youth, on average, engages in some form of media for 10 hours and 45 minutes each day (Kaiser Foundation, 2011). This figure has significantly risen from the 7 hours and 29 minute average in 1999. These are the students that largely populate traditional classrooms on the campus of colleges and universities. By better integrating classroom material with the cultural interests of students, instructors are more likely to find pedagogic successes. This media infiltration in the classroom cannot simply be satisfied by the use of PowerPoint presentations and animation features within that program environment. The current student population is hungering for more media and more creative forms of media within the classroom (Gardner, Jewler, & Barefoot, 2011).

Film is certainly not a new pedagogical tool in the geography classroom. Film clips from feature films, television shows, and internet portals have added detail, humor, and cultural credibility to many learning environments. In a U.S. & Canada class, I use short, often humorous, film clips from YouTube to help introduce or enhance the sense of place for certain regions. In my advanced urban planning courses, I seek to use similar video snippets, but I have great difficulty finding suitable material. It was not difficult finding films that illustrate the great skyline of Manhattan and the busy sidewalks of the Theater District, but putting those film clips together with a narrative about urban typology and population density would be ideal. Ideally, I could evocatively describe places like Ben Marsh (1987) does regarding the anthracite region in Pennsylvania or Jon Goss (1999) whose humorous yet brilliant commentary on the Mall of America remains an interesting read even for undergraduate students. However, I am a more visual than verbal being, so the solution is for me to create my own videos highlighting aspects of urban design that are not readily apparent in my local college town, specifically showing people engaging built environments to provide students with a better understanding of function within the urban landscape. I created five place-based videos for my urban design class specifically highlighting the functional aspects of design and how people engage their surrounding built environments. This paper explains the process, some technical hints for video capture and production, how to craft objectives and shot lists to encourage confidence in crafting similar video projects.

**LEARNING FOUNDATIONS**

As Carl Sauer noted in 1956 about geographic education and scholarship, we should not, “limit ourselves to what is visually conspicuous, but we do try to register both detail and composition of the scene, finding in it questions, confirmations, items or elements that are new” (Sauer, 1956, p. 289). Film allows for deeper exploration in landscape morphology, process, and even pattern (Zonn, 1984). Geographers may not have utilized film as much because of its close connection with the humanities rather than the sciences. Rather than treating the humanities as barren ground for geography, we might view film, television, and music as beneficial methods of evoking meaning and sense of place within the cultural landscape (Meinig, 1983). This is changing, however, as the “spatial turn” in cultural studies and a sharper focus on visual media incorporates the role of space and place in representational theory and identity formation (Lukinbeal, 2004). A hallmark of geographic education is learning about unfamiliar places. Using film to establish a sense of place for a city and to connect material about the natural or
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