

Seeing for ourselves: when teachers make documentary films. *Rebel Goulash* and *Over the Rainbow*

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To begin ... a moral tale for anthropologists, a fantasy in which an anthropological cinema exists—not documentaries about ‘anthropological’ subjects but films designated by anthropologists to communicate anthropological insights. It is a well-articulated genre distinct from the conceptual limitations of realist documentary and broadcast journalism. It borrows conventions and techniques from the whole of cinema—fiction, documentary, animation and experimental ... this fantasy is more like science fiction than anything else. It is not remotely close to being realized. But it is an ideal worth pursuing (Ruby, 2000, pp. 1–2).

This fantasy of the visual anthropologist, Jay Ruby, as we argue elsewhere (Weber & Mitchell, 2004), is one that resonates with teachers and teacher educators who, like the practitioners Ruby refers to, are interested in reflexivity and representation. What *can* a teacher do with a video camera, we ask? How might we as teachers and teacher educators working in media and language studies, in particular, position ourselves as cultural producers? What would the documentaries made by teachers look like? In this article, we offer examples of how we have used the medium of video in our own classrooms and in research in teacher education: Charles’s video *Rebel Goulash* is based on a project on metaphoric language in a secondary English classroom in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and produced as part of a graduate module at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Media Studies. Paula’s video *Over The Rainbow* is based on an English-as-a-second-language classroom involving NATO personnel studying in Canada, and produced as part of a graduate course ‘Textual Approaches to Research’ at McGill University. Claudia, as the instructor of both courses and a producer of video documentary material as well¹ is in this case a participant with Charles and Paula in working out what it might mean for teachers to become

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protagonists within media production. Together we draw on the work of visual anthropology, media studies and arts-based research to make a case for ‘seeing for ourselves’ through video documentary. The article is divided into five sections: *Conceptualizations*, in which Charles and Paula each offer a ‘behind-the-scenes’ background for their video projects; *Viewings*, in which we offer a close reading on each of the projects; *Technical considerations*, where we talk about the making of the documentaries; *Reflecting on the process*, in which Charles and Paula explore what the project has meant to them; and finally *Reframing the classroom: teachers-as-film-makers*.

Conceptualizations

Rebel Goulash (Charles)

My film is a goulash because it is essentially just random posters. It is rebel in its soundtrack, one or two controversial posters and my sometimes maverick proclivities. The film reflects my research interests in its suggestopedic (or, if you prefer, accelerated learning or brain-based learning style), my personality in the soundtrack, and my heart as a back-up power source. In suggestopedia, as Lozanov (1978a,b) writes, one channel of learning is *peripheral*. The teacher ensures that the colourful posters on the walls continue to instruct students even when such students are not looking at their textbooks. Such posters may never be referred to, but they play an important part in the learning process. Thus, if *Rebel Goulash* is about the media, it is about posters, yes; advertising, certainly; film, a bit; but it is primarily about interior design in that it documents the transformation of an ordinary classroom into as close as I can get for the moment to a suggestopedia room. Real suggestopedia rooms are carpeted, have comfortable couches, and boast good sound systems. The film is also suggestopedic in that it features a large body of information presented artistically, if not in any apparent sequence and a pre-film brain energizing exercise. It is also colourful and sometimes witty, it features positive suggestions on two posters (‘I am a Winner’ and ‘My brain is absorbing this information effortlessly’) and thus hopefully appeals to both the analytical and creative ‘sides’ of the viewer’s brain. Also, I hope that, in viewing it, students will bridge for just one second the divide between school and what McLuhan would call their mythical lives.

Over the Rainbow (Paula)

In the course of working with groups of military personnel, teaching them English, I encounter certain tensions. These tensions, I think, stem from the marginalizing which results when some feel they are more powerful than others. In this case, learners who are marginalized do not invest in using the language. They leave the programme discouraged and disappointed. On the other hand, when I see relationships develop in my classroom, friendships form, people accept the uniqueness in one another, and I see changes. The fellow who smiled at the end of the video is an example of one of the students who seemed to discover some potential within himself during the course of

the programme. There were others who also did this. Some, like Vlad, didn't. As a teacher of second language I see my role as far more than passing on rule formation. It involves helping students to see their potential. Maybe someday 'over the rainbow' more and more of my students will be able to do this. Maybe, someday, I will be more of an instrument through my teaching for enabling this process. This video and my research is about just that.

Viewings

Rebel Goulash: from the director (Charles)

We hear the hubbub of students' chatter and see the opening shot, a typed quotation from Marshall McLuhan:

The young student today grows up in an electronically configured world. It is a world not of wheels but of circuits, not of fragments but of integral patterns. The student today lives mythically and in-depth. At school, however, he encounters a situation organized by means of classified information. The subjects are unrelated ... The student can find no possible means of involvement for himself, nor can he discover how the educational scene relates to the 'mythic' world of electronically processed data that he takes for granted (McLuhan, 1966, pp. viii-ix).

The hubbub continues. The next shot shows three typed questions. It is headed: Pre-Film Questions:

1. What is the sound of one hand clapping?
2. Add 25 cats to 75 dogs. How many paws?
3. Imagine your bedroom right now.

Silence. A close-up of a piece of lewd graffiti in white correcting fluid on the side of a desk. Zoom back to see a girl sighing at her desk. Pan across the room in silence. Some students look hard at work; others look bored. The room looks bare and unattractive.

After a blurry pan shot, we see the title, *Rebel Goulash*, in three different colour schemes. Harry Connick (the song is called 'Follow the Music') tells us 'They tried to conquer the world with guns ...' (1994), then a close-up of the word *Relax* typed in blue. The camera zooms back, and we see that the word is printed on a page held by a girl in a classroom. We cut to see her sticking the piece of paper up on the back wall.

Now we see the word *Azure* creatively depicted in close-up. Again, we zoom back, see a student holding the poster, and then witness the student affixing the poster to the wall.

And so the film continues: poster, student, wall. Poster, student, wall. Sometimes, we see a student talking, smiling, or putting Pres-Stik on the back of a poster. As students affix posters, we can see the previous posters on the walls.

We see posters for: *Climax*, *Penchant* and *Palindrome*. The music changes to Blue Man Group's driving techno 'Rods and Cones' (1999). The posters continue: *Onomatopoeia*, *Antithesis* and *Synecdoche*. Some posters are colourful and clever; others are banal or hardly legible. *Hyperbole*, *Irony*, *Déjà vu*, *Paradox*, and countless

examples of *Simile*, *Pun*, and then more examples of *Azure*. The back wall of the classroom is filling up now.

Some posters show advertisements for products not usually advertised: The Comb ('strengthens and protects the hair'), Air, Girls, The Dentist ('he cares; I don't'), Metaphors ('use them in infinity and beyond'), 'Zol' (marijuana), and Falling in Love.

Sometimes, between posters, we see a photograph. In one, we see a boy at a desk. The camera zooms back and we see the same boy holding a photograph of himself. The photographs are affixed to the bulletin board at the front of the classroom, as is a photocopy of a photograph of Michelangelo's David and a couple more posters. Occasionally, we pan across the posters already on the walls.

Some posters create brand names for ingenious new products: *Ennui Airlines*, *Verb Airlines*, *Pun Airlines*, *Hyperbole Cereal*, and a number of energy drinks. My favourite in this category is the 'Mutrix', a remote-control device that allows teenagers to mute grumbling parents.

The music changes to Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' (1991). To the throbbing rock beat we see posters depicting *oxymoron*, *antithesis*, *sarcasm* and *boredom*. One poster reads: 'I am a winner'. Another simply shows the word *periphery*. One says: 'My brain is absorbing this information effortlessly'. A couple of posters are about aspects of the media [e.g. a poster showing an example of a close-up, an amusing parody of 'The Weakest Link' television quiz show (The Weakest Fart), and the Adidas logo above the word *Addicted*].

After an awkward sound cue, we hear Big Daddy's (1991) wacky rock and roll version of 'Greatest Love of All'. The pace speeds up. Sometimes, now, we only see the poster and not the student holding it. Some posters are mysterious (Cliché of a Cleavage), and some are inspirational (Sucking the Marrow Out of Life). Some simply seem to spell out words (disappoint, disapprove). A clever and well-executed poster shows a bottle labelled Meiosis. One drop of the liquid is dropping into a glass, and the caption reads: 'Whiskey? Just a drop'. As the song comes to an end (and just a bit beyond), the camera pans around the room. Once again, we see the colourful artwork. In the middle of the room, students smile and wave in complete contrast to the austere silence we saw at the beginning of the film.

Zoom to another colourful poster.

The End.

Over The Rainbow. A viewing by Claudia²

Paula's film combines a 'talking head' narrative with edited cinéma vérité scenes of her classroom at a military base near Montreal. The opening scene shows Paula, the narrator/'talking head' holding the microphone and speaking directly to the audience, telling us about some of the problematics of second-language teaching generally, and something more specific about the small group of NATO officers from Eastern Europe, who are currently in Canada and learning English. Her class. In this role, Paula is in the reporter/journalist mode that we are used to seeing live from the

Kennedy Space Centre. She speaks firmly—no nonsense—but a little haltingly in places—and we think of her as someone who knows about and cares about her teaching. No actor could play her any better.

From that opening scene, we go into Paula's classroom to where a group of six or seven men in military uniform are sitting in a semi-circle around Paula. In the scenes in her classroom, she explores a number of issues—themes in the data that she has been collecting on second-language learning for her doctoral thesis, and themes that she sees as barriers to effective language learning: teacher control, the marginalization of students from their own learning (and from each other)—and she demonstrates, too, the ways that status and rank, in particular, enter this picture. We hear the men laughing, talking amongst themselves, groaning at the types of assignments they are required to do, and lamenting their test scores by expressing 'how dumb they are'. At one point, we see them making fun of one of their colleagues, who is struggling with the language tasks, and they demonstrate what might be regarded as typical excluding behaviour (derogatory comments directed towards Vlad, or meeting in a group at coffee time without him, etc.), something that Paula also sees as yet another feature of the classroom she controls. As she demonstrates in the video, there is something not quite adult-like about some of the classroom scenes. While the men do not misbehave, they are, in some ways, not unlike a group of adolescent boys, and Paula, who may not be much older than some of them, is 'the mom'—a point that, in itself, may be a barrier to learning.

At another point in the film we visit their dormitories that, as Paula narrates, are Spartan in appearance. Nothing on the walls, no ornamentation and nothing, of course, out of place. Clearly it is important that we understand where they are located when they are not in class. But then, in the last scene, we see something else—the men are all sitting around the table in the cafeteria chatting and laughing with Paula who is in her coat and ready to leave for the day. Class is out. A Keith Jarrett rendition of 'Somewhere over the rainbow' plays in the background and we are drawn in to seeing that, notwithstanding the built-in barriers to learning in these kinds of government-run programmes, there is after all a huge bond between Paula and these fellows. They have all—teacher and students—'let their guard down'.

Paula tells us about how she controls 'her' class: she is the one who writes on the chart paper what the class is going to do each day, she is the one who dishes out the assignments, she is the one who decides if they can skip an assignment. Paula's overall thesis pertains to how she is realizing just how powerfully inhibiting this kind of external control is to adult learners (and maybe to any learners). The final scene in the cafeteria is particularly poignant in driving home this point because we see the actors in a new light. Paula, wearing the coat that we all recognize from the times that she slips into 'my class' a few minutes late,³ now covers up her 'dressed as a teacher' outfit that we saw in the teaching scenes. The few bars of 'Somewhere over the rainbow' that are playing in the background and that could be regarded as 'getting sentimental', aren't so much that. Rather they move us to think about these men from the other side of the ocean and far away from home (where they are truly in control of their lives) as another version of 'somewhere over the rainbow'. And there is something so much

more collegial about the relationship between teacher and learner in this scene—Paula is on her way home. The men will return to their dormitory rooms that night. But for now, they are all taking a break from what we have come to think of as their roles (teacher–learners), laughing and talking easily, as people do.

Technical considerations

On the making of Rebel Goulash (Charles)

My original intention was to rent a digital camera from the university's audio-visual department. When this was delayed bureaucratically, I decided to resort to my faithful analog model. While the quality of the image on the screen is satisfactory, it was very indistinct through the viewfinder during the shoot. As I have had unfortunate experiences in the past when trying to edit between camera and VCR, I decided to shoot the film in a single take; the 'cuts' in the film are merely my finger on the Pause button. The overall 'look' of the film is not the smooth cut I wanted to achieve through digital technology. However, I rather like the 'rough' look, and thus decided to leave the awkward sound cues as they are. I knew from the start that I wanted Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'.

My idea for this project comes from a classroom film I made some years ago at Hyde Park High School in Johannesburg. Posters to music was just one element of that film, but I used this Nirvana song in the poster section and it just seemed to be in the right mood, so I wanted to use it again. The two Harry Connick Jr. songs are not actually the songs I would ideally have chosen. In truth, these two songs appear simply because their lengths fitted the time jigsaw I was trying to complete in patching audio and video. I'm happy with the first track, the mysterious 'Follow the Music', which tells us: 'This is the groove', but I'm less happy with the second one: 'She ... Blessed Be The One', which feels somehow a bit arbitrary. The Blue Man Group song is very funky and received favourable responses from some of the few students who have already seen the film. 'The Greatest Love' at the end finishes it all off with a positive and up-beat message.

On the making of Over the Rainbow (Paula)

The filming was all done in a day. We, my daughter and I, used two powerful cameras; one we kept stationary in a corner of the classroom; the other my daughter and I used to film outside the space of the classroom: the halls, student rooms, the school layout. The moveable camera was also used for close-ups while the class was in progress so that when a student spoke or was involved particularly in some way, my daughter would focus in on that student. Finally, I gave this camera to my students for them to film what they thought was important to document.

Some students were initially shy but, as the day wore on, they seemed to forget the cameras and became very natural. It felt to me, judging from the way we interacted, that it was a 'normal' day. After the day of filming, I spent three ten-hour days

preparing the video. It involved looking at the enormous amount of footage from both cameras and deciding what was important to clip for the sake of my argument or thesis. I, with my daughter's help, used Final Cut Pro3 for this process. After compiling the clips, I then decided on a storyline—when I would speak and generally what I would say and what clips would fall under each section. Encouraged by my daughter to speak spontaneously rather than from a prepared speech, we filmed my short blurbs. Then I gathered, arranged and cut the clips into even smaller bits. Next, I chose a title and typed it in along with the names of those who would be acknowledged and recognized for their participation. Finally, I chose the song [*Somewhere Over the Rainbow*] and added it to the credit timing.

Reflecting on the process

Rebel Goulash (Charles)

The students (mainly isiZulu-speaking teenagers from the local South African townships of Umlazi and KwaMashu, but scattered with all hues, languages, persuasions and economic circumstances) who have seen the film have spoken warmly about it, as have the one or two colleagues who have viewed it. On reflection, I'm happy with *Rebel Goulash*. I feel a creative satisfaction. (Note: If I were not determined to finish typing this, I would watch it again for the zillionth time right now.) Like Paula, I feel satisfied because this was my vision and I had complete artistic control. *Rebel Goulash* has brought me back to being a dedicated Lozanov-inspired teacher, something I'd somehow lost for various reasons. Lozanov has revived my teaching spirit before; I think he's in the process of doing it again. The creative joy that Lozanov brings me in my teaching also somehow instills something else: my gratitude to live and do creative work among these warm people in this beautiful city in this transforming society.

But, in addition to now being the proud owner of a videocassette of a film I have directed, I also have a classroom far more appealing than I had this time last year. The fact that the Headmaster may move me in the next semester is not such a big deal; I'll just have to take down all the posters and move them when I move.

Over the Rainbow (Paula)

Making *Over the Rainbow* made me think back to when I was a child. My response to what I wanted to be when I grew up was always 'an artist', even though I knew that reaction would be met with snickers from my siblings. I really did feel like an artist, however humble the product. For example, I was able to choose the song 'Over the Rainbow' for the final few seconds of the video. It happens to be played by a jazz pianist I particularly like, Keith Jarrett, and it was the song I most sang to my children growing up. He speaks to me of promise and of freedom ... What was so thrilling, I think, and what the video-making has helped me to see more plainly than I ever realized before, was that with this medium I could express myself and have power over

my own message to say what I wanted to say. Moreover, I felt that I was free from the multitude of rules that my background and education have instilled in me and that weigh on me consciously and unconsciously as I create with words on a page. As for the argument that I was proposing about adult learners, I realized that with the video I could build a case that ‘readers’ could interpret without the bias of my choice of words, but by ‘seeing’ it for themselves. It also allowed me a springboard for discussing what viewers saw and to gain new insights into my own practice from a variety of perspectives.

I have talked about my research interests to other groups before, and it always appears afterwards that the essence of my message has not been entirely understood. However, in this case, after I showed the video to my colleagues in the class for which I did the project, I felt immediately from their responses that they understood exactly what I was trying to say. They inserted personal examples of their own that added to the argument of how language learning and our investment in it has a lot to do with the context of that learning and the nature of the relationships in it. I was really taken aback by their response. I wondered afterwards if it is because we have become so dependant on visuals in our society. Or does it suggest the power of visuals in supporting the spoken word?

Reframing our classrooms: teachers-as-film-makers

Are we film-makers or are we ‘camera-toting’ teachers let loose with a video camera and an editing suite? In the same way that David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (1994) see the significance of young people as cultural producers, we think that there is a case to be made for teachers entering into video production in relation to our own classrooms. Visual arts-based approaches to self-study (Weber & Mitchell, 2004; Mitchell, Weber & O’Reilly-Scanlon, 2004), as the accounts of Charles and Paula attest, allow us to ‘see for ourselves’ in our own classrooms how the ethnographic eye of the camera can operate. The relatively inexpensive, accessible and user-friendly video technology that now exists, as Paula points out in her reference to *Final Cut Pro3*, means that more and more ‘ordinary people’ can work with video, something that we see increasingly, too, recognized through the Internet, where there are already a number of dedicated teachers-as-film-maker websites.³ Indeed, this access to relatively inexpensive digital technology opens up new possibilities within a multi-literacies framework for both teachers and students.⁴

At the same time, there are some interesting shifts in artistic approaches to self-study through relatively inexpensive technology as we see, for example, in the work of Sadie Benning, who began her career as a film-maker using a Fisher-Price Pixelvision video camera that she received for Christmas when she was 15 (Paley, 1995; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). As a tool for both inquiry and representation in self-study, video documentary draws on scholarship within feminist visual studies (e.g. Citron, 1999; Knight, 2001) as well as work on home movies in family photography by Chalfen (1987), Kleinhans (1986), and Zimmermann (1995). Reflexivity, autobiography and self-consciousness, as Jay Ruby (2000) points out, are central issues within

critical anthropology—both in relation to representation (including self-representation) and to a consideration of viewing the viewers: how do other anthropologists respond as viewers? Along with others working in the area of visual anthropology and visual studies (see for example Rollwagen, 1988; Martinez, 1995; Hocking, 1995; Rabiger, 1997), Ruby discusses some of the ways that a number of ethnographers have artfully ‘constructed’ their work, using video (see for example the work of Robert Gardner, 1986), producing a range of films that have become ‘classics’ within visual anthropology: *Nanook of the North*, *The Hunters*, *Dead Birds*.

Finally, we consider the activist agenda that video technology offers to teachers and teacher educators. While this is something that we have explored elsewhere in our work with youth and arts-based activism in relation to HIV/AIDS (Walsh & Mitchell, 2004), we see the potential for this kind of work within classroom-based inquiry. In our work with young people, we talk about the ways in which artful engagement through photography, video documentary, and so on, offers important possibilities for ‘taking action’ in relation to AIDS prevention.⁵ Video documentary already plays an important role as a tool for activism and social change, as we see in work on participatory video and community activism (Juhasz, 1995; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001; White, 2003), so that the idea of the classroom as a community or as schools (and teachers) operating within communities offers further support for teachers-as-agents-of-change working through video. In our work on *Reinventing ourselves as teachers: beyond nostalgia* (Mitchell & Weber, 1999) we pose the questions ‘what can a teacher do with a camera?’ and ‘how can we turn the video camera on ourselves?’ Now we are putting forward the idea that video production can be a tool for representation and inquiry, and a way to go ‘thick and deep’ into the study of our classrooms. As educational researchers and practitioners, we could be producing our own classics in school-based ethnographies, for example, that are not unlike the work that Ruby and Gardner advocate within visual anthropology.

Following their examples we could see the possibilities for large educational research conferences such as the American Educational Research Association having a segment of programming devoted to video documentary, along with small visual studies in education conferences which would operate as film festivals in and of themselves. Is this just a fantasy, as Ruby poses it, something ‘over the rainbow’, or might we begin to think of this work as contributing to a new literacy for teachers and researchers in teacher education, a literacy that is based on seeing for ourselves?

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Charles Kusner is a high school teacher, Shiatsu therapist, and personal fitness trainer in Durban, South Africa. He has written a novel (*The Pink Army*) and an English textbook (*English with Muscle*), both available on <http://oldwebmail.mcgill.ca/redirect?http://www.lulu.com> in the first half of 2004. He loves singing and theatre.

Paula Charbonneau-Gowdy is a doctoral candidate in Second Language Education at McGill University in Canada. She has worked at all levels of education, primary to university, and more recently in adult ESL in a NATO-sponsored military language training programme. Her research interests are in identity, power and investment issues. In her current project she examines these issues through the use of technology in internationalized Second Language learning sites.

Note

1. See, for example, reflections on the making of *Unwanted Images: Addressing Gender-based Violence in the New South Africa*, in Mitchell, Walsh and Larkin (2004) (for video see Mak & Mitchell, 2000).
2. This reading of *Over the Rainbow* by Claudia comes out of a collective viewing of Paula's documentary at the end of the course, *Textual Studies in Research*. We also include parts of the text of this viewing and Paula's reflections in a chapter on arts-based approaches to self-study in Weber and Mitchell (2004).
3. See for example *Media Arts Academy: Teachers*. NW Film Center, retrieved 6 December from http://www.nwfilm.org/teensteachers/yfp_academies_teacher.html; *Teacher as Filmmaker: i-Videos as an Approach to Technology Education and Professional Development*. Michigan State University, retrieved 6 December from <http://www.msu.edu/~dwong/publications/AERA/AERA2003-TeacherasFilmmaker.doc>; *The director in the classroom*, retrieved 6 December from www.thedirectorintheclassroom.com.
4. Here we wish to acknowledge the work of Denise Newfield at the University of the Witwatersrand who, in the MA in English Education, drew to our attention the links between her work in visual literacy and the work we have been doing at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in video documentary and arts-based research. See also Newfield and Stein (2000).
5. For further documentation of our work on arts-based activism and AIDS prevention, see the Gendering Adolescence and AIDS Prevention (GAAP) project website, www.utgaap.info.

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