Imitations of Life:

Using Digital Filmmaking for Media Literacy and Social-Emotional Learning

**Akela Smalls**



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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to introduce the use of digital filmmaking as a 21 Century learning tool for building social emotional intelligence and media literacy skills in middle and high school students. Research suggests that the effects of adolescence on social cognitive processing in young adults can present a challenge to social-emotional development. As Muslim students approach adulthood in an environment that is often informed by visual media and navigated through social media the development of a healthy self-aware Muslim identity can also be a challenge. The literacy skills gained through viewing and utilizing digital media as a tool helps to promote an understanding of the positive and negative effects of media and to build more informed and critical consumption among students. Examples of implementation of digital filmmaking as a high school elective as well as its use as part of a larger school curriculum are given. Students collaborate on the production of digital stories, documentaries and public service announcements through a process that incorporates multiple subject standards and help to develop emotional intelligence and higher thinking skills. Through encouraging students to imagine and reimagine life and the increasingly more complex social interactions that they face, they are provided a platform through which they can explore and express their own unique issues of self-identification, self-management, and social awareness.

Statement of Problem

While it is always our intentions as Islamic educators to promote the love of Islam and the example of Tarbiyah as best among our students, these intentions are often challenged by the influences of entertainment, media and the Internet. Violence, abuse, bullying, and risk taking are examples of behavior that can be promoted through teen media consumption. The problem is that while TV and the Internet may be used to help teach reading, math and other disciplines to young learners, much of the media that is consumed by teenagers as entertainment can have a harmful effect on their emotional development. In addition to these harmful elements, young adults will find no end of examples of values and lifestyles in entertainment that are in direct contradiction to what we encourage our children to aspire to. They can find movies and television shows that present, many times, unrealistic examples of what it means to be an American teenager. These examples often encourage a negative self or body image (Wade, Davidson & O’Dea, 2003). Children learn and in many cases imitate examples of what is seen as “normal” or “acceptable” teenage behavior by the larger non-Muslim world. Social media may encourage teens to interact or seek to gain validation online in ways that may not be healthy and often times does little to guide them “socially” (Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten, 2006). In addition to problems that may stem from negative media influences, the physiological stages of adolescence in and of itself can cause some challenges to social-cultural processing (Blakemore & Mills, 2013) that may make it more difficult for teens to adapt to their changing emotional environment.

Review of Literature

Art education has been used extensively in relationship to social emotional learning and literacy with new art and media technologies being used. In *The Arts Education Policy Review* Liane Brouillette discusses the use of the arts in education to help children create healthy social scripts. Artistic expressions involving drama or storytelling have a positive impact on classroom dialogue by encouraging sensitivity and by helping students to understand the emotional expressions and responses of others. This type of social learning can help to counteract the negative effects of commercial media. As Brouillette (2010) suggests, “Without balanced interpersonal interactions the task of learning healthy social scripts becomes difficult. This challenge is exasperated by continued exposure to televised images of aggression” (p.17).

The use of media literacy programs in conjunction with social emotional learning has been documented in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*. William Bowden of the University of Rhode Island conducted a six-week media education summer program with rising eighth grade students from low-income areas of Rhode Island. The program included students from diverse ethnic background as well as some students who were English Language Learners. This program allowed students to work on media projects while trying to develop stronger capacities of self-awareness, positive decision-making, and stronger relationship development. Bowden (2015) suggests that the emphasis on collaboration that was required to produce the digital products that the students worked on helped to facilitate positive peer interaction among students who may have had language and cultural differences.

Methods

The two methods that I identify for introducing digital filmmaking is as a semester or year long high school elective course, or as a short course and learning tool for other subjects. Each method involves teaching or reviewing some aspects of traditional literacy education and visual arts education. The semester or yearlong high school courses can serve as a 21 Century media technology credit or as a visual arts credit. When using as a learning tool, activities can be structured around normal class schedules or as an afterschool club activity.

Practical Implementation

As a long-term elective course digital filmmaking focuses on film as a medium through which art, storytelling, communication and technology is explored. Students are involved in the planning, production, and post-production of digital media, which is then entered into youth film festivals and competitions. The course is structured to allow students to tell a story that will promote a set of core skills valued by Al-Falah’s Academy high school curriculum. Students create films ranging from fiction to non-fiction, from reality to fantasy, that reflects the vision of Tarbiyah that Al-Falah Academy’s overall curriculum embodies. Students focus on the five areas of filmmaking; development, pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution. Each area poses its own challenges and allows for collaboration between students, faculty, and community members. Students enrolled in Digital Filmmaking are introduced to skills and knowledge that emphasize design and problem solving processes and a practical approach to understanding media and it’s uses. Students will improve literacy skills to master the storytelling and writing skills needed to create films. Students will also further engage in the creativity, critical thinking and problem solving skills emphasized in visual artslearning. The structure also allows students to explore careers and personal interests in the field of broadcasting, design and film production. Learners gain a sense of accomplishment by creating a final product, which can be seen by family, friends, fellow students, and the Al-Falah community.

As a learning tool digital film is used to enhance Social Studies, Islamic Studies, and Health Studies lessons. Students create storyboards or short narratives about relevant subject matter that they then turn into short videos. Inexpensive everyday equipment and resources, such as cell phones or disposable cameras and software available free online, are used to create simple digital products. By creating short films, advocacy videos and PSA’s that reinforce lessons in social responsibility, character building, and wellness promotion students create social scripts that help to inform themselves and their peers about important issues. This method can be used in both middle school and high school classes.

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