

Project Based Learning (PBL): enhancing student motivation to promote real world accomplishment

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Abstract

This paper seeks to illuminate the application of visual sociology within a project-based learning (PBL) framework. The objective of this year-long course is for students to produce a short-form documentary (6-7 minutes) utilizing a framework from either a sociological, linguistic, or international cooperation perspective of their choosing. Throughout the course, students engage in various levels of learning. Initially, they acquire the ability to integrate the concepts they have chosen into their narrative compositions. Subsequently, they develop a stylistic approach for their video production, followed by the gathering of necessary visual, qualitative, and quantitative data. The extensive duration of this project presents a notable challenge for students, many of whom have not previously engaged in long-term endeavors. This course serves as an introduction to essential skills such as communication and time management. Effective communication skills are highly important due to the collaborative nature of this project. The presence of multiple deadlines necessitates students' heightened awareness of time management to ensure the project is completed in a timely fashion. This paper analyzes statements from 26 students who have directly participated in this course. Many of the statements in the reports show clear signs of students recognizing an increase in interpersonal skills and an improvement in their ability to plan. Many students recognized the perceived value of their experiences in this course and how these experiences can be applied to their future endeavors. These sentiments are corroborated in their recorded statements.

Keywords: Project-based learning, visual sociology, communication skills

Introduction

Students' ever-growing need to keep up with the fast-paced changes happening across many industries can be proactively addressed with the flexibility offered by project-based learning. The

group work students perform acts as a microcosm of society and community. While technology is rapidly changing, the social order provided within the group model will always be valuable to them. The communicative skills needed to succeed in the group environment for one full year cannot be ignored.

While this particular class uses the production of a short documentary, it is not a class on video production but rather a course on social identity through teamwork to produce something that students normally think they couldn't do on their own. Identity formation, as defined by Erik Erikson, is the mutual self-sameness between the community/group and the individual. The formation of identity occurs through social negotiations in the form of actions and accomplishments, both successful and unsuccessful.

All of this allows students to react to real-world experiences in the classroom while forming a strong group identity, as stated by Boss and Krauss (2018), which in turn promotes self-regulated skills that are invaluable to all students throughout their lives (Orakçı and Dilekli, 2022). The choice of using documentary production is partly due to the instructor's expertise in editing, which provides students access to a skill they wouldn't normally have. Additionally, young people are becoming more visual learners. This was recognized in a study conducted by Zuev and Bratchford, stating, "In an intensely hyper-visual age, images and visual artifacts shape our understanding of the world and influence how we interact, present, and perform within it" (2021: 11).

The shift from text to visual dominance isn't new, as voiced by Hughes (2012), who wrote about "an increasingly visually-dominated social world, on the one hand, and, on the other, a social scientific world which, at least until recently, has been primarily oriented towards text." Other teachers could use different tools, but the outcome should be similar as long as students work together and function within several roles. Pauwels (2015) stated, "The visual researcher must play multiple roles as producer, facilitator, and communicator." During this project, students realize there is always something to be done and become skilled at recognizing the needs of the group through collaboration and fulfilling more than just one role.

One full year of group work allows students to witness the progress made by others, and they begin to focus more on the outcome as a group rather than just what they are personally doing. They see how their actions affect the attitude of those around them, and even the most shy of students start to speak out and participate more over time.

This paper hopes to explain how this form of learning affects students through self-reports written by 26 students. This paper will be peppered with quotes from students to show how they

have reacted to what they have learned. This paper also hopes to act as a qualitative follow-up to an earlier literature review I wrote on project-based learning and visual sociology (O'Keefe, 2023).

Before diving into the center of the self-reports, I think a brief review of PBL is needed. I have started by implementing PBL and active learning techniques as applied to visual sociology. Adkins (2021) has stated how sociological research seems to be a natural fit for PBL-style learning due to its interactive nature. PBL does have certain challenges, as noticed by Guo et al. (2020), that measuring students' actions is very important. I overcome this through the use of rubrics. The system I use is well-documented in O'Keefe (2023).

This course uses PBL as a delivery method to teach visual sociology along with various research techniques. Many students lack the ability to go deep into research and often feel they have saturated a topic even though they have only scratched the surface. Ren et al. (2012) discovered that active learning environments promote deeper learning. Once students realize they have limited themselves in the past, then, in general, student engagement rises (Almulla, 2020). There are cases that can show the opposite effect when students become detached from the meaning of the project. This needs to be recognized, and the instructor needs to directly intervene in such situations until the student can attain an acceptable level of performance. In my experience, the majority of students consciously recognize and resolve their difficulties and tend to move forward in a very motivated and efficient way. I think many of the statements offered by the students themselves reflect this.

The statements I have chosen from the students cover a wide variety of experiences, ranging from both the positive and the negative. The positive results are sometimes reflected globally among the students, while other changes are more individually based. For example, while a few students had already accomplished skills in time management, many students had not. Over the year, their ability to create effective plans took some students longer than others to understand, but by the end of the year, it was rather impressive to see so many of them understanding the benefits of planning. This extends to realizing the importance of communicating ideas clearly to build the collaboration needed to finish on time. This promoted teamwork and motivated them with friendly competition. They became better at solving problems on their own as well. I will show later in this paper what the students said about all of this.

Some students had to overcome what I call "The Great Wall of Correctness." Unfortunately, the Japanese system creates a narrative, while not necessarily purposely, that a correct answer always exists. Once students learned to realize they were in control of their project's narrative,

they slowly overcame the restrictive wall of correctness. Finally, many students mention how valuable they feel the skills they have learned will be in their future lives.

Student Statement Criteria

The criteria for the students who filled out the short essay answers varied depending on which year they took the class. The contents of the class were adjusted from the 2022 class (students 1 through 13) for 2023 (students 14 through 26). The major difference was how the instructor participated in the class. In 2022, I played the role of producer, editor, and camera operator.

The producer title is often misunderstood by many people. The reason for this is that it depends on the personnel working on the production as well as the size of the production. In the case of this project, I would create the deadlines while advising students on what needed to be done to stay on schedule. The students' roles were more like assistant producers who went and did all that needed to be done to prepare for shoots. They would contact the Fukuoka Film Commission to see if they could take video in certain public places. They also checked which music was legally allowed to be used in their project. This required a good grasp of time to get everything to fall into place within the time frame they had available. As the instructor, I monitored this movement to help them become more efficient in any way possible.

Next, the editor and the camera operator positions are two technical roles that I took on to help students focus on necessary research, content creation, and data collection. The researchers needed to read many articles in both Japanese and English to gather quotes and certain references needed to support the information they had written in their narration. Once the information they gathered was confirmed, it would be added to the narrative of the documentary. The editor would add what was needed to the timeline in editing software.

Finally, they also were collecting data. Data consisted of questionnaire results, which were done 100% by students. They created the items for the questionnaire, then distributed it, and did all the data analysis themselves with little to no help from the instructor. They even chose the graphics they wanted to use in the final video. All I did was enter the numbers into the graphs, which were all preset to perform the animation according to the data entered.

Students also collected data in the form of video interviews and b-roll. The students would book the interviews and plan the set as well as where they would be taking interview and b-roll scenes. I would help shoot the scenes they had set up with the camera. The benefit was that the students could focus better on what the person being interviewed was saying rather than be dis-

tracted by operating the camera and audio recorder.

Two major changes were made for the 2023 class. The first was a suggestion from a professional producer of independent films. He suggested that I have the students shoot with their phones because the shoots looked too professional when I did them. While this was a good suggestion, in some ways, I regret giving up the role of camera operator. There are many technical problems when people shoot with various smartphones. The codecs often didn't match with the editing software. This created unreadable or overexposed files, which made the fairly simple importing process very confusing to the students. Plus, many students do not know how to frame shots very well, so many of the shots for the 2023 documentaries were much more amateur-looking than the 2022 documentary. Finally, the audio was often too quiet or was filled with background noise that students didn't recognize when they were shooting. I did give the students a crash course in shooting interviews and b-roll during the class. I also created an instructional video myself that I posted on Google Classroom as a reference for them, along with several other YouTube videos as well. The instructions were overly complex and needed to be simplified.

The second major difference was that in 2022, the whole class acted as a team of 15 students broken into several groups that performed specific tasks such as online research, questionnaire creation, and interviews. These roles all changed as the project developed. Out of the 15 students, 3 or 4 sometimes retreated from helping with the project and focused on personal work. Once it was recognized that this was the case, I would always assign them a new role. This got me wondering if more students didn't have enough to do. This is why, for the 2023 class, I created three separate groups that would create three separate short 6-minute documentaries. I figured there were plenty of things to do for 4 or 5 students to stay busy throughout the semester. This was a much harder system to follow and keep track of, with three groups all moving at very different paces. One group performed very well. The second-best group's performance started out disorganized but started to get it together about midway through the year. The third group had many conflicts and broke down in a somewhat passive resistance without anyone in the group taking control. A leader did exist, but she was a reluctant one at best. It took almost the whole year for them to finally realize they could go weeks with zero progress.

All in all, I think students in the 2023 class gained much more when it came to learning how they work in a group and about themselves. The 2022 class was a closer unit by the end of the year. They definitely felt challenged with the project, but they were not as challenged as the 2023 students were. This is observable in the statements they made.

Student perspectives

As I mentioned earlier in this paper about the differences between the 2022 and 2023 classes, it must be recognized that there is also an argument for the level variations of students' individual ability. The atmosphere of the classes was also very different. In 2022, the class was always exchanging information with each other and was often lost in the work they were doing, with a very focused group attitude. The 2023 class was three separate atmospheres at once. One group had high energy, another often seemed confused, and another was often talking in circles and getting little done. This brings us to the first group of statements by students on how they were using their time.

One quick note is that the statements were originally written in Japanese and then translated into English with the assistance of ChatGPT, then proofread for accuracy by the author. The use of ChatGPT should be transparent when used in any stage of the writing process. The accuracy of all the statements is guaranteed by this author.

Time management

The use of time is a skill that can be learned if the individual recognizes its necessity. One of the reasons for attempting a one-year-long project versus several short projects is the amount of work students will need to plan. Preparation for a short project can be crammed into a short amount of time, while a long-term project needs to take into consideration the time remaining well before the deadline looms to finish on time. Some of the students are very aware of the time given for the project. One student who did well from the very start as the leader of her group stated:

“Our goal was to complete the documentary in 30 sessions, with each session lasting 90 minutes..., outside of the sessions, I prepared individual materials that could be done independently in advance. I utilized this time to create meaningful content that could assist the team, such as editing permissions and scripting narration to save time during the actual sessions.”
(Student#016).

She immediately recognized the limits of time from the start and independently acted to utilize both the class and personal time efficiently. While she was very aware of time limits, this was rare among the other students. Most students needed to figure out why they were falling behind

on their own. As the instructor, I would routinely make them aware of the time, but due to past habits, this action was not recognized as important at first. As time went by, many students realized their difficulties were rooted in their own actions and adjusted at various paces. One student expressed it this way:

"Firstly, the importance of starting tasks early. I realized that by completing tasks early, even when there is a deadline or ample time before the next class, I can create time for review. Since becoming a university student, where self-management of time and schedules has become more prevalent, I've come to appreciate the importance of planning ahead to allow for flexibility...I learned a lot and recognized the challenges of managing time and deadlines independently. As I'll need to manage myself more when I become a working professional, I've decided to start practicing self-management from now on" (Student#021).

The key point is self-management. Student #21 realized that it starts with her. Once she understood the pace of the project, she experienced more flexibility to improve what they were doing rather than just racing to finish all the time. The more she could do this independently, the more she could join in on the interdependent actions needed to help create a strong team. By the end of 2023, I saw the majority of students acting in a very self-motivated manner. Plus, one of the biggest steps was seeing students writing down what they needed to do. This created a major improvement in converting what needed to be brought to fruition. This was also seen in the results from the preparation students were doing between classes as well. Unfortunately, students often get used to going to class and just doing the minimum of what needs to be done with little to no thought about it before the actual class begins. In many cases, this habit changed in most students. This student statement mentions a similar feeling among the students:

"...I realized the importance of advance preparation. Since we were using a location within the university, we needed to obtain permission in advance... We made efforts to improve by finding areas for improvement and repeating the process." (Student#008)

There were occasions early on when students had shot an interview without getting permission or had shot in places that were too noisy. These clips needed to be retaken. Taking video can be fun, but the students realized quickly that scheduling all the group members needed to shoot

the interview, as well as preparing the person and place being used in the video, took time. When they are told to reshoot something, they become very disappointed. I always reinforce the power of just moving forward while learning from errors and the importance of preparation to prevent future errors. I also tell students, especially Japanese students who can be particularly hard on themselves, that I will never be upset for any reason while they do their project. They needn't worry about making honest mistakes. It is natural for mistakes to happen. I also remind them that even though I will not be upset, they are being graded on responsibility, content, attitude, and participation, not quality. However, in most cases, if all the things I am observing come together, quality soon follows. This is the natural course of actions.

Communication skills / collaboration

Once students who grasped the basic concept of time and self-management understood they needed to communicate what they were doing or planned to do to the other students clearly. After completing her project, one student wrote: "From this group project, I also understood the importance of teamwork and communication" (Student #001). (Nepalese) Another said: "Through frequent communication, our team improved its communication skills" (Student #026). (Nepalese) Long-term group work really encourages students to come out of their shells. Certain changes just wouldn't happen in short-term group or individual work.

"I learned the importance of cooperation and communication. Unlike individual work, we extensively discussed incorporating each person's opinions and thoughts as much as possible in advancing things" (Student#017).

This student was not alone in her experience. Other students made similar statements:

"Over the past year in the seminar class, I feel that my ability to think independently has significantly improved. This is especially attributed to the fact that most of the class activities were carried out in groups, fostering my skills in independent thinking. However, I realized that it's not only about thinking but also about effectively communicating those thoughts to others" (Student#018).

These are common core changes that happened across the groups. They slowly learned they

needed to confront the different opinions of others and incorporate their ideas altogether because if they didn't, their group members wouldn't have their ideas aligned toward the same goal. This would not only make advancement difficult but most likely create a less rewarding outcome. But opening up was very hard for some of the quieter students.

As the instructor, I can see certain students early in the process pulling away from the group. The need to assert themselves does not seem prevalent to them at the time. They have created a style of communicating to get them through short-term projects, but they are often not prepared for long-term ones. In this case, I usually make a conscious effort to address the whole class while making friendly eye contact with the students in question. I explain to them the outcome of those who don't speak up. Then, I also address the habit many Japanese people have of just working around those who don't participate rather than trying to get them involved too. It is better to have a group of five working as one toward a goal than three people working toward that goal while the other two are off in their own world. The feeling of accomplishment is very different. One shy student said:

"Personally, I have always found it challenging to assert my opinions and point out differing views. However, in this group activity, each member was encouraged to contribute at least one opinion. We learned to extract positive aspects from diverse opinions and combine them. This experience made expressing my opinions more comfortable, and I found myself in an environment where I could confidently advocate my ideas. It was a meaningful and rewarding time" (Student#019).

It is pleasing to see how she found the course "meaningful and rewarding." She overcame her shyness to learn the value of speaking her mind in a way that is not only good for her but also promotes the success of those she is working with. In her situation, this was a personality difference, but what happens when it is cultural?

Both 2022 and 2023 had Nepalese students involved in the group work. While cultural barriers do exist, the personalities of those Nepalese students need to be taken into consideration. For example, if the student is a good listener, they tend to do better. One of the biggest differences between the Japanese students and the Nepalese was the amount of actually talking about ideas rather than executing those ideas. Nepalese students are not shy to say what they want, which was consistent throughout the majority of Nepalese students. It was in their personalities that the

outcomes differed greatly.

One example was the Nepalese student who was a member of a high-performing group. This group was defined more by their leader than the group as a whole, but all the members did what they were assigned, and things went very well. She stated:

“Communication within the group is essential for smooth work. My group members were fantastic, offering their opinions and collaborating effectively. I also learned the importance of time management in our lives. Doing things on time or following a schedule is crucial to avoid unnecessary stress. Thanks to our teacher for making our group work more effective by helping...” (Student#024) (Nepalese)

It wasn't as smooth for all the Nepalese students. Another student who struggled with communication in her group was very polite in her statement, but in class, she consulted me directly about the problems in her group. First, let's observe what she wrote:

“Choosing this seminar was a decision I'm glad I made. It taught me the value of staying calm, always being prepared to correct mistakes, and developing patience—lessons that proved to be the most challenging but also the most rewarding...Being the only foreigner in my group posed difficulties, especially when I struggled to catch up with the discussions and understand my group's ideas and opinions.” (Student#025) (Nepalese)

She mentions the value of “staying calm.” This was mostly because she would have long conversations, often in a mix of Japanese and English, about what she wanted to do. She rarely seemed to be interested in the other students' ideas because they were less likely to speak up within a bilingual environment. The next week, the Japanese students would be doing something completely different from what the Nepalese students had suggested the week before. She found this frustrating, and that's when she consulted with me.

I suggested that she search for the answer not only in her teammates' actions but in her own as well. This was not about who is right. They just needed to say exactly what they were thinking about the opinions of the other group members. This especially needed to be done when someone disagreed with something being said. I also offered to act as a mediator if necessary. They never took me up on this offer, though, and seemed to work out most of their problems on their own.

Teamwork/motivational

The differences within the group activities were not just challenged by cultural differences but also by personality types. As mentioned earlier, some students found it very challenging to be in a group for a long-term project. The pressure to speak out became more apparent to the shy students. I often observe those students closely when possible. I wait to see if they choose to join in or shut down. If they were always on time before but started coming later or had unexplained absences, I would always enter the picture acting as a general check but with the intention of addressing that specific student's disconnect.

This was where the power of teamwork really came into play. There was also healthy competition between groups as they observed each other's actions, which promoted motivation among the groups. This was particularly reflected in one student's comment while she observed how well another group was working together.

"I thought there was a difference in progress between groups, with some being more proactive than others. Looking at other groups, it seemed like members were actively participating, progressing quickly, and I felt a bit envious"(Student#013).

This particular student became the leader of her group. She was originally reluctant to be the leader. I asked her to define what a leader is and why she was hesitant to take on the role. She was worried about all the work she would have to do. I explained to her that a bad leader does all the work, but a good leader learns to delegate the work among the group in a fair and equal way that all the members can accept. It was at that moment that she realized the power of leadership and the efforts of others. Other students also recognize the power of interdependence.

"...I feel that a sense of unity was created among the seminar members by accomplishing something together, and we have become closer. We also experienced a sense of accomplishment...It was important to respect each person's values and be aware of different values ...it was difficult to create something good without the cooperation of many people." (Student# 006)

This was especially common for students to realize the power of the group once the year was finished. When they look back, they see what they have completed and are astonished how their re-

sults were directly connected with teamwork.

“What I learned from the seminar is the importance of collaboration. The planning and execution of the interviews were tasks that could not be accomplished alone, and the team members needed to work together and make gradual progress. My friends were always willing to help others once they had finished their own tasks, and I was influenced by their behavior to pay attention to the situation of those around me after finishing my own work.”(Student#007)

“...consolidating the ideas of five individuals into a unified form took some time. However, this allowed us to discover ideas that one person alone might not have thought of, providing an opportunity to create a better work.” (Student#017)

This is an invaluable lesson for many of them. The irony is that this is what has been tried for many years with group activities. The problem has really always been the length of time they work together, as well as the members changing every week. Those short-term conditions allow the students who need to improve but are shy or lacking certain communication skills to escape through withdrawal or just try to minimize their involvement with such activities. The long-term project builds a type of courage within students to be a part of what is being created rather than allowing others to do it for them.

This is actually one of the strengths of being in a women's university rather than in mixed classes. While many young women have no trouble speaking freely around young men, others would find that situation basically impossible to speak up. Subsequently, they would rely on the young men to do or think things through for them. In an all-women's university, this is really the most useful reason for this situation, and the outcome shows that many female leaders graduate from such a background. This leads the discussion back to leadership.

Students who are not shy but rather independent and capable of doing all the work on their own can also benefit from this long-term group project. While they may be independent and do well in school, they still mistakenly take on the role of a leader, as a student quote from earlier in this paper labeled the position as the person who does all the work. This is not what leadership is about. Leadership is connecting, not controlling.

“The selected person naturally becomes the leader, carrying a sense of responsibility. While I

was fine with this aspect, it was a bit challenging as other members exhibited a more passive attitude with differences in the amount and intensity of participation. However, I believe this can be resolved if the leader manages it skillfully as it seems to depend on the leader's discretion." (Student#013)

She understands that a leader guides students who not only need but also want guidance. Everyone wants to be useful. Everyone wants to help, but when they don't know how, they get lost and retreat from communicating at times. I have learned from years of teaching that poor-performing students are not necessarily "dumb" but rather lack an understanding of the basics of the topic at hand. They hate certain situations and subjects mostly because they never learned them properly. The satisfaction of understanding the topic at hand attracts people to learning.

There was also a student who, from the start of the class, was the type of leader to do it all but soon learned she needed the other students' help to complete this very complex task. She put in a lot of effort to change over the course of the year.

"...before each session, I provided guidance to the team on the tasks to be accomplished that day. Our team operated without assigned roles like a leader, allowing everyone to actively contribute. However, recognizing the importance of progressing the work, I proposed the tasks that the team should focus on for each session, ensuring the participation of all members." (Student#016)

Out of the feeling to prevent conflict, she doesn't even label herself as the leader in this passage, but if anyone witnessed her actions every week, it would be clearly recognized that was exactly what she was. It was an impressive sight. She even had a very passive student who barely spoke, but even that student found ways to participate equally throughout the group work. She followed the instructions closely and fixed any mistakes quickly so as not to fall behind schedule.

There are also students who, even though they were not the leader, began to realize that things slow down when they are not in class. One student clearly showed that she recognized the importance of her own actions.

"I sense an increased sense of responsibility compared to before. For instance, if I were to miss a class, it would inconvenience my group members, leading to a heightened sense of re-

sponsibility. This increased sense of responsibility became a driving force behind my active participation in class, without skipping or neglecting any tasks.” (Student#018)

Active group members create a very positive atmosphere which is fairly easy to observe. The group that was working together effectively often came to class earlier than the other groups. They often greeted each other very clearly. This was not always the case for all the groups.

One group, in particular, had only four members compared to the other groups with five. This group had difficulty communicating from the start. No leader emerged early on, and their actions were not defined clearly at all. One of the students from that group wrote this:

“...I was unsure about what tasks needed to be completed, by when, and to what extent. This lack of clarity made it challenging to progress with the work as planned. The second issue was the inability to use time effectively, leading to time constraints.” (Student#015)

This group often missed early deadlines. It wasn't until they saw the results of the other groups that they started to try and create clear goals and applied themselves more to the task. It seemed they were all waiting for the other members to do something, but they realized in the end that they had wasted many weeks just moving in circles. This group received the same instructions as all the rest, but they just were not applying themselves to the task at hand. Unlike the other groups, the start of the class was like going to a job they didn't like. The stark contrast was very observable in their demeanor. Thankfully, they came together toward the end after they reassessed their roles and started to verbalize their thoughts.

Challenges

The groups who understood how to solve problems moved quickly toward their goal, but individual members of each group also had many hurdles to face throughout the project. These hurdles ranged from personal paradigm shifts to technical issues that slowed down their project. Many of the students had never done a research project of this size and were overwhelmed with all the information. I explained to them how information on many topics is endless, which is why they needed a solid goal and scripted narrative to help define the information they were looking for. Without this guideline, all information looks useful, and they get bogged down, which can lead

to them losing their motivation.

One student said: "This task was more difficult than I thought, and summarizing lengthy papers such as research results was very challenging." (Student #011) While another stated, "We also researched papers and read a lot of articles, which was difficult to distinguish whether the information was correct or not." (Student #004)

The fear of being "correct or not" was prevalent among many students. This fear paralyzed them from moving forward. It is an unfortunate side effect of their years of studying in high school. An interesting thing happened when students started to realize they were in control of the narrative. They became much more motivated and started doing more work outside of the classroom. The term "correct" became a word that was correlated to the information necessary to complete the narrative they created.

One student put it this way: "It was difficult to sort through the vast amount of information on the internet and select the correct one... it was essential to be aware of what message it should convey." (Student #006) Once this information was gathered, many students found a great sense of accomplishment. Student #13 said this: "There were challenges, including technical issues, but as we approached completion, there was also a sense of enjoyment. I will continue to do my best." Student #9, who had worked hard creating and implementing the online questionnaire, sensed this sense of accomplishment by saying, "It was also exciting to see unexpected results in the questionnaire."

All the students went through various transformations. While some were bigger than others, these transformations were all related to finally understanding their part, their purpose. The struggle with the "problem of relevance" (Sormani, 2016) was common among students at the beginning of the project. Not knowing their purpose created a very confusing atmosphere for them. In the end, while all at different paces, the students came to the necessary understanding of what they needed to do to finish the project.

Understanding information

Other than increasing their ability to plan and manage time, students experienced an internal change by transforming from viewers or consumers. They began to understand what producers and creators actually do. They may not do this in their own future, but they now understand what needs to be done to produce information and compile it into an easy-to-understand narrative for the average viewer to appreciate.

There were several students who directly commented on this point. They stated:

“We learned that while documentaries may seem to accurately convey facts, the author’s intentions and ideologies can greatly influence them, and there may be instances where inconvenient aspects are cut out during production. We were able to learn from a perspective that we hadn’t noticed before and it was a great educational experience.” (Student#011)

“I had watched documentaries before, I had never thought about them from the perspective of the creator, so I was able to discover things from a different and multifaceted viewpoint.” (Student#010)

“...the experience of creating a documentary from scratch is not something one can easily come by, making it a valuable and unique experience. While watching news programs and variety shows in the past, I used to be just a passive viewer. However, now I not only consider things from the viewer’s perspective, such as the progression of the story, filming techniques, and the use of music, but I also think about the intentions of the creators, making this, in my opinion, the most significant growth within myself.”(Student#015)

Each of these students had different experiences and progressed from various levels of communication. Both students 10 and 11 were already capable communicators, and this exercise most likely enhanced what they were already somewhat proficient at. On the other hand, student 15 was a very quiet student and passive throughout her group work.

As I observed over the one-year course, I could see that there was a struggle for relevance within her. She wanted to do more, but it took her some time before she could actually work up the courage to take some responsibility. In my opinion, when she says she felt “significant growth” in herself, it was also physically noticeable to me and her group. That said, she was still a very quiet person, who I think received a kickstart to develop even more in the future. It was rewarding to see such personal growth within an introverted student.

It wasn’t just the viewing of documentaries that made students use their critical thinking skills. They also noticed through the research of various studies that information can be challenging to verify. The accuracy of research articles, as well as the bias of many online articles, became more apparent to them as they found articles that completely contradicted each other. Here is

one student's opinion on this subject.

"since there were articles with questionable credibility, it was necessary to carefully discern and search for articles on our own. There were articles with research results that couldn't be trusted too much, and articles that were too conclusive, which made me realize once again that it is dangerous to fully trust everything on the internet." (Student#011)

While she noticed the discrepancies in the information from various sources, she realized the dangers of the internet. Currently, there are fears that artificial intelligence will cause an even deeper divide between the truth and the information being offered as genuine. People may eventually call for governments to administer labels on information, but this is ironically what is shown in George Orwell's *1984*, where he describes the Ministry of Truth. Such things are often not forced on the people but are a manifestation wished for by the people.

To stop this from happening, critical thinking skills have never been more relevant. This leads us to the final group of statements from students who talk about how this course has provided them with skills for the future.

Future use of new skills

The education system has become antiquated in so many ways, and it seems to be most evident recently after the COVID-19 pandemic and the growth of artificial intelligence. Both the pandemic and AI have exposed the weak areas of education, especially at the university level in Japan. This may be true, but the essence of what universities can offer remains.

First is the connection to teachers who know how to pass on skills that should be useful for their whole lives. University students also receive access to various networks that support their future growth. These connections to companies and organizations would be much harder to come by if the student were on their own.

The goal of the course being spoken of in this paper is to try to follow a tradition of what seems to have been lost. I am trying to cultivate young people to help prepare them for what is waiting for them in society. Communication and problem-solving are at the top of this list. This was commonly spoken about in the student statements.

"When entering society, communication skills and cooperation become crucial, so I intend to

apply what I learned in the seminar to those situations. Recognizing that I lack in certain aspects of communication skills, I aim to cherish opportunities like this seminar to enhance my communication abilities in the future.” (Student#017)

“Looking ahead, I recognize the importance of planning meticulously in advance. Additionally, I believe that our group, including myself, fell behind because we didn’t fully understand our roles, and this lack of clarity affected our progress compared to other groups. Furthermore, despite having a wealth of information and footage, our inability to act flexibly and effectively utilize them, coupled with insufficient communication within the group, resulted in regrets. Overall, it was a challenging but highly educational experience to collaborate as a group and create a single piece of work.” (Student#020)

Both of these statements show the progress these students experienced. The strength of the long-term project is found in these sorts of transformations. As educators, we strive to see actual progress right in front of our eyes. This can be a challenge at times, but in the case of this course, it was a common occurrence.

The changes I witnessed were quite different from student to student. The main theme of understanding the importance of communication and teamwork was one of the most commonly observed changes. These changes are directly related to their future work in many ways. Several students expressed this in their statements:

“...there was enjoyment in each group completing their own tasks and creating one large project. I also learned about workflows that can be used in future work or daily life, not just the documentary production process.” (Student#008)

“ I was able to learn many things that I wouldn’t normally know. First of all, accomplishing something as a group over an extended period is something I had never done since entering university, so it was a valuable experience.”(Student#014)

“Through the experiences in this class, I not only sensed personal growth but also deeply understood the importance of cooperation and responsibility. I believe these skills will be highly beneficial in my future university life and professional activities.” (Student#018)

I noticed that the concept of workflow was very new to many students. Workflow helps create an easy-to-follow guideline that can be used to complete a specific task that requires repetitive actions, which, if set up correctly, can be easily laid out in a plan to reduce stress and work time. Workflow can also be updated and optimized as time passes. Students rarely learn about such applicable concepts, and it was noticeable how valuable it became to them.

This is also one reason why, when my third-year students perform podcasts in the fourth-year class, the majority do extremely well once they understand the workflow of what needs to be done. Student #14 expressed that she had never done anything like this since entering the university. She recognized the value in what she had learned.

Student #18 mentioned that she “deeply understood the importance of cooperation and responsibility.” While this is common knowledge for the average working person, there are still many university students who don’t understand this basic concept. Student #18 saw this for exactly what it is—“highly beneficial” to her future.

It really doesn’t matter what kind of company they work for in the end. All of the skills they learn in this course will forever benefit them. It is satisfying to see the students themselves recognizing this very fact.

Discussion

This course from the start has been an experiment to offer students a class that not only teaches them how to apply a sociological framework to modern Japanese society but also serves as a self-review of the skills they have versus the ones they need to build upon. In past years, I have taught sociological concepts in class, but rarely can students apply them to their lives. The old process seemed to have created an esoteric understanding of such concepts, leaving students somewhat confused. I have done exercises where students have chosen a framework and applied it to current societal problems, but it always seems forced and somewhat contrived.

Even though most of the students chose only one sociological concept for their documentary, they tended to learn it very well by the end of the year. This becomes a sense of accomplishment and transforms into a feeling that will stay with them for many years to come.

The grading process for this class can be the most challenging. Not all students receive a top grade. Underperforming students do receive low grades at times. These grades are determined through the several performance rubrics I apply to their in-class work and presentations. I think in future classes, I will give them scores periodically along the way so they will know whether

they are underperforming or not. Most underperformers rarely recognize they are not working as hard as other students. They need to be shown these grades throughout the process to prevent any misunderstandings.

This class does not grade on the technical skills of documentary creation. This is why they have access to my own knowledge to help them through that. The managerial and research side of what they do is actually a much more applicable skill for their future careers, so more focus is offered in that direction. One way to improve student performance would be to offer a clear, easy-to-follow chronological workflow so they can get through the process while gaining experiences that are applicable to their future. Creating an easy-to-follow workflow chart is very challenging for the instructor to do because of the changeable nature of students' projects from year to year. But if it was created, this will contribute to the reduction of stress levels and tension within the group environment that students may have felt in past classes. This has all been noted for future coursework. Students who know what they need to do are often more motivated and are less likely to shut down.

The workflow offered to students needs to be carefully planned out. It needs to direct just enough to offer guidance but not enough to do their work for them. Additionally, the instructor should never micromanage this process. Students need to learn to work out kinks in the system on their own. The hardest part for them is even recognizing such kinks. One example would be the students who were worried about being "correct" or using "correct information." Another example is students recognizing the flow of their narration becoming difficult to understand. Finally, students who start to understand they are falling behind and learn to regulate their work effort accordingly.

They need to be fully aware of the autonomy they have over the outcome of what they are producing and use their time in accordance with the goals they have. The challenges that go hand in hand with visual sociology include the freedom students have to apply their own ideas to what they are creating, which is why past studies have said it is a good match with higher education (Metcalf, 2012).

The autonomy offered in this course sounds like a liberating concept, but it is actually a high-level challenge for many students who are children of a system that is laid out for them within the Japanese school and testing system. This is why the workflow mentioned earlier needs to be almost a skeleton plan rather than a detailed one. If given full autonomy, some students may literally break down in a panic due to the overwhelming amount of work they feel like they need to

perform. A plan that offers direction without corrupting their own ideas should be the goal.

As seen in many of the students' statements, communication seemed to be the most challenging. Having creative ideas and goals is one thing, but expressing them to other people who do not share those ideas is a huge challenge for many students. Facing problems and then communicating how such problems can be solved is a skill possessed by only a small portion of the population. Even a small advancement in this area alone gives the students a learning experience they will benefit from.

One student who excelled throughout the process wrote in her statement:

"Every moment was enjoyable, and it was an irreplaceable time where we could learn while producing output as a team. Engaging in activities where you learn while outputting as a team is an experience unique to this seminar, and I feel grateful..." (Student#016)

From the outset, she grasped the class's concept clearly. Prior to the start of the class, she sought clarification from me and maintained consistent communication regarding her activities, her group's progress, and their plans. Her communication style with me was often short, concise, and direct. She consistently met deadlines, often completing tasks ahead of schedule. Despite encountering technical issues within her group, they adeptly resolved them without requiring deadline extensions.

She was a great example of a model student, a feat not easily replicated by many of her peers. Nonetheless, her diligence serves as a testament to the overall progress made by every student in the class toward enhanced efficiency. Maintaining high expectations of students is crucial, as it invariably yields superior outcomes compared to lower standards. Students who struggle with those standards should be instructed on how to build on their weaknesses until they too can perform at a higher level.

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※Translations of student's statements were performed by ChatGPT and checked by the author for accuracy.