The **Language** of
FILM

A look at how teachers use IFC's Film School curriculum to teach literature.
by Julie Mehta

For several months last spring, Kathryn Housepian's two junior American literature classes at Perrysburg High School, near Toledo, Ohio, became mini movie studios. "Everybody had to do a storyboard and a script. Then the classes voted on which ones were most easily adaptable to film. We came up with four scripts in each class and formed groups to produce them."

Housepian was using Independent Film Channel's (IFC) Film School, a free, Internet-based curriculum designed to teach language-arts skills through filmmaking. "Since the kids were writing scripts and filming and editing the movies themselves, they got a better sense of story," says Housepian. "You could hear the evaluation and assessment process going on in their minds."

HAVING A VISION

The IFC Film School curriculum features six units of instruction that provide a detailed picture of what's involved in making a movie and show teachers how to help students create their own films. "The idea is to inspire a new generation of film lovers, to teach media literacy, and to show that great films can stand up against classic works of literature," says Evan Fleischer, marketing director for IFC. "We want to break the mold of teachers using films merely as a reward at the end of the school year."

The curriculum includes instruction in both the creative and technical aspects of filmmaking. Topics include writing film treatments and adapted screenplays and creating storyboards and prompt books. Most lessons focus on film adaptations of works of literature, such as *Hamlet*. The final unit outlines the steps involved in actually making a movie, such as scouting locations, setting up a shooting schedule, composing lighting for scenes, and editing. All the lessons specify how they meet national standards for language arts and technology education and offer guidelines for assessing students' performance.

"We purposely designed the curriculum to be flexible. You can pick sections of it and use them as you see fit," says Fleischer. "It doesn't require teachers to have proficiency with filmmaking. A lot of the activities don't use the camera, but

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instead concentrate on imagining a movie trailer or creating a monologue."

STEPPING INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

Housepian found enough material in the first unit of the curriculum to keep her students busy for four months. Her students all wrote soliloquies and made movies of selected pieces, including a commentary on the different strata of high-school society and a girl's perspective on the psychology behind chewing gum. "With this curriculum, the students can't sit and passively watch—they become the performers. It's very empowering for them," says Housepian. Several of her students' movies have been accepted into film festivals.

The students further explored the world of cinema by watching a Charlie Chaplin silent film and discussing the camera technique in *Napoleon Dynamite*. This semester, Housepian plans to use film versions of *The Scarlet Letter* to reach students who may be put off by the book's challenging language. She will show several screen versions of the story so her students can discuss the various directors' interpretations. Housepian also plans to bring the soliloquy film project to her technical-writing students.

TELLING A STORY

Chris Tully also used the soliloquy lesson as the basis for a movie project by his students at the Middle Bucks Institute of Technology. Tully teaches multimedia technology to 10th- to 12th-graders at this career and technical school in Bucks County, Pa., and used the IFC Film School curriculum to infuse the technical training with academic and creative components.

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"They already had the technology part—with this they were actually producing a film," says Tully. "It made them understand character development, plot, and how to move from scene to scene."

Tully's 18 students produced a single film in six weeks. Students took on responsibilities such as writing, editing, acting, and directing. "I just facilitated and gave them advice, but they made all the decisions," says Tully. "They pushed through all the complications, worked together as a team, and managed time—and had the success of completing a film."

That film screened at a local film festival and on Comcast's local on-demand channel. Tully's students are continuing to learn the IFC curriculum in independent study this semester.

REACHING AN AUDIENCE

The IFC curriculum not only teaches students how to make movies, but also gives them a forum for sharing them. Students can upload films to the Film School site so others can view, comment, and vote on them. Top-ranked films will air on IFC and be sent to local cable providers so they can get more exposure. "This program gives kids the tools to tell stories on film," says Housepian. "Kids love technology so much—and video in particular can reach kids in ways books don't." ::

RELATED RESOURCES

The Cellar Podcasting
www.perrysburgschools.net/buildings/hs/cellar/podcasts/podcastindex.html

IFC: Film School
www.ifc.com/filmschool

IFC: Film School: Student Resources
www3.ifctv.com/filmschool/StudentResources.htm
A collection of links to filmmaking sites and video-editing software as well as lists of great movies and student film festivals.

Multimedia Technology
web.mac.com/c.tully
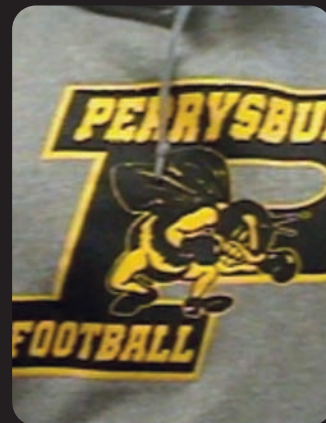
From high school society to chewing gum, no topic is left unexplored when students create movies.