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Audiovisual Language

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Chapter 5
Imagination and Technique: Audiovisual Composing

Extending the Uses for Audiovisual Composition
European Context

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Images and Sounds Audiovisual Language
Chapter 5 Backstory 3

Extending the Uses for Audiovisual Composition
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In *Images and Sounds Audiovisual Language (*chapter 5 *Imagination and Technique: Audiovisual Composing: Video Essays, Letters, Portraits and Poems*) the uses for audiovisual composing within education were extended into a European context. This backstory answers some of the questions surrounding: how the European Cultural and Language Audiovisual Project was funded, who participated in it, how it worked and what happened to modern language learning and cultural understanding as participants across Europe engaged in the exchange of audiovisual letters.

The vagaries of politics, and subsequent research opportunities, fashioned outside my control, dictated the parameters and direction that I could now take. It was the 1980's and a change in government resulted in closing down the funding stream for curriculum development, in schools in the U.K. However, at that time Europe was slowly opening up research opportunities, which provided funding for the European Cultural and Language Audiovisual Project. Extending the research into Europe provided opportunities for exploring audiovisual composing, in different settings, for another purpose; but it did slow down the implementation of mass audiovisual composing, into the school curriculum, in the U.K.

European Cultural and Language Audiovisual Project

The European Cultural and Language Audiovisual project [1] was a small pilot programme exploring possibilities for using audiovisual composing as a way of learning modern languages and encouraging deeper cultural understanding. The project team [2] initially worked with universities, and formal education bodies, to establish an audiovisual correspondence between young people, in schools, in Britain, Germany, Italy and France.

Context

The project team traveled to Germany, Italy, and France to discuss the ways in which an exchange of audiovisual letters could take place. We were quite open about how the project could be structured and did not expect the schools in the UK to be at the centre. We expected that there would be interactions between all the participating schools in a 'star' structure, rather than a 'wheel' where the UK would be the hub with the other countries forming the spokes. However, after lengthy

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[1] Note: The European Cultural and Language Project was funded by the European Cultural Foundation and
[2] Note: about Simon Sharron

discussions, and largely as a result of using audiovisual composing, which was a new way of working for all participants, together with the particular interest in English as a foreign language, it was agreed that Germany and Italy would exchange with British schools. They would all use English, and either German or Italian. The British, German and Italian teachers were reassured that they would have guidance on using audiovisual composing so that their young students would be able to participate. Eventually, four separate schools in Britain were selected and paired with the schools in Germany and Italy. The French education department eventually decided that using audiovisual composing was too problematic for them, at that time.

In the early 1980's, educational establishments throughout Europe could be viewed as predominantly traditional institutions, maintaining conventions, which can limit 'thinking out of the box': and so the openness and enthusiasm that we experienced as we met our prospective partners in Germany and Italy was inspiring. Introducing new ideas into any established curriculum can be difficult and this particular project posed specific kinds of challenges because of the use of new technologies, which required technical and conceptual skills related to audiovisual composing. The participating teachers had to move beyond their current teaching methods and think about how they could reconcile the needs of their syllabus with these new ways of working. Coming from very different backgrounds and experiences, all the teachers were interested in how audiovisual composing could contribute to their modern language teaching, which finally contributed to the diverse approaches that we observed.

Audiovisual correspondence in Germany

The University of Braunschweig, which is located in a majestic city in the north west of Germany, was the university partner, for the German part of the project. We met colleagues that were involved in educational provision for schools, and in particular, the teaching of English. They selected three secondary schools: a grammar school (Gymnasium), secondary modern school (Folkschule) and comprehensive school, so that they could discover how each type of school might benefit from this kind of activity. This provided a unique opportunity for observing audiovisual composing in various settings, with distinctive objectives that raised different questions and addressed a range of challenges.

One of the challenges for the teachers was gaining the necessary skills in audiovisual composing. This was approached in a number of ways. For instance, in the comprehensive school team teaching provided one solution, bringing a modern languages teacher together with an art teacher, who was very skilled in tape-slide production. These teachers found innovative ways of working within the established timetable. For the tape-slide production planning process the teachers and class would work together. Some of the time required for developing the language part of the audiovisual letter would be carried out during a modern languages class: with the photographs taken during an art class. The teachers and young people would then come together again to record the sound and to integrate the images and sounds. The joint teaching was managed by the teachers and often occurred as an extra-curricular activity outside formal teaching time.

The repertoires of expressive forms and techniques, found in fine art, drama and music, underpin audiovisual composing. These were explored in *Images and Sounds Audiovisual Language* chapter 2. The art teacher, apart from being skilled in fine art and photography, was also interested in music and sound effects and facilitated the young people in running a lunch time student radio station. He was also an artist using the tape-slide medium to express his creative ideas. These skills, together with the modern language teachers' commitment to work in audiovisual composing, as part of her language teaching, contributed to the success of the work in this school.

The young learners in the Gymnasium used video. These audiovisual letters presented another educational challenge. The teachers' discovered that the video letters from the British schools revealed that English children were using colloquial English. This was potentially problematic because the use of 'proper English' was required by the formal education system. This was resolved when the young learners' motivation increased dramatically because they enjoyed writing the scripts and then 'talking' in their second language to their English friends. They became very proficient in video production, which they valued. The teacher used this situation to explore the differences between written and spoken language; acknowledging that speaking in each other's language, despite the problems, brought the languages and culture to life, providing relevance and significance, which was made possible through the exchange of audiovisual letters.

The staff in the Folkschule welcomed audiovisual composing as a way of contributing to their English teaching. Their more flexible timetable and teaching approaches were particularly relevant for using innovative teaching methods. Communicating in English was no difficulty for these young learners and they were teamed up with a class in England that would use English for the exchange. Both groups of young people were very inventive in the ways in which they began to develop the video letters that they sent to each other. The teachers considered that it was important that their children came into contact with English children and could share information about their schools and everyday life.

Audiovisual correspondence in Italy

Our Italian colleague did not work in a university, but was a radical charismatic catholic priest, who played an active role in the Milan City Council Centre for Innovation and Education. This centre was well resourced with language laboratories, computer rooms and an audiovisual resource centre, which housed a small television studio, editing suite and viewing rooms. The audiovisual technicians went into the schools and made a wide range of educational video programmes that supported teacher training in this city. He brought together all aspects of the political and religious spectrum that makes up the diversity that is Italy, and specifically in this case, lively, cosmopolitan Milan. His enthusiasm for education and commitment to innovation in education was reflected in the project and he was responsible for the recommendation of a coordinator who would facilitate collaboration between the Centre for Innovation and Education and the school.

The coordinator was very willing to explore audiovisual correspondence between two European countries, where young learners would be sharing each other's

languages. She considered that value lay, not only in exchanging material produced by young people, targeted to young people; but in developing new skills that used a different means of communication, like images and sounds. This could enable young people to converse with each other, putting their second language to use. The students would be producing tape-slide letters. The coordinator met the participating teachers and offered technical support from the Centre for Innovation and Education, on for instance, the recording of audiotapes and photography. She was interested in the young people using these technologies independently: gaining planning, research and technical skills, transforming their theoretical study into practice.

The teacher introduced her class to the possibilities of audiovisual correspondence and the prospect of exchanging audiovisual letters with young people in Britain. They discussed what could be achieved through the use of tape slides and how they would share their everyday life. The topics that emerged were personal introductions, their school, families and leisure time. Working in small groups the learners selected a topic that was closest to their interests.

The learners carried out the work at school and by themselves, meeting at home and in outside locations where they could create the slides, that they had planned, in their storyboard. Initially they tended to write the script as a comment on the different slides. They explained that it was a satisfying challenge learning to take photographs, which were directly related to their audiovisual story. They found the story making process interesting because they had to deal with everyday language: they were not discussing grammar problems or literary matters. The challenges that they faced were more practical and closer to their own lives. They also appreciated the opportunities to discuss amongst themselves using colloquial English to solve conceptual and practical problems.

The young people told us about how they independently made slides and recorded an audiotape. For instance, one group wanted to explain and share their experiences at school. They decided on the most important moments bearing in mind what the other class would like to know. They talked enthusiastically about how this work was different from usual school activities. For example, they came to school earlier to take slides of people arriving at school and negotiated with the bus driver to stop the bus in front of the school so that they could get the photographs that they had planned. They explained that they enjoyed being able to take initiatives and be creative. Another group chose to speak about their city; but on reflection said that they felt that they had to deal with a lot of historical facts and images and their audiovisual letter was not as personal as they would have liked.

In response to questions relating to their experience of using audiovisual ways of working in their English language learning; the young people explained that they had to try hard to achieve the right intonation and pronunciation because they knew that other teenagers in another country, for whom English was the mother tongue, would be listening to them and they wanted them to understand what they were trying to share with them. They also said that working together was a good experience and useful because they had to learn how to take decisions. On receiving an English tape slide they said that they had to listen really carefully because of the different accents.

Audiovisual correspondence in Britain

Four comprehensive schools were selected in the South East of England, close to Brighton Polytechnic, now Brighton University, where this European project was based. The Education Department in the Polytechnic, Local Authority Modern Language Advisers and Head teachers from the participating schools were very co-operative, offering their assistance and advice. The teachers were interested in discovering the value of using audiovisual composing in their teaching of modern languages: and were prepared to put in extra time and work to try out new activities and ways of working.

We were aware that support for audiovisual composing and the development of a concept of video letters would need to be initiated from Britain and that sharing this process would require regular visits to the German and Italian teachers. This enabled us to observe the teachers working with their young learners in Germany and Italy and provided many insights into the audiovisual composing process. During this process we were able to evaluate the usefulness of audiovisual composing in modern language learning and discover whether exchanging audiovisual letters developed greater European understanding.

Given that the exchanges between the Italian and German partners were with English schools, we decided to take the opportunity of observing what happened to young people, struggling with their mother tongue, when they had the opportunity to exchange video letters with young people from another European country, learning English as a second language. This was a quite remarkable experience.

For example, one group of young students in an English school had great admiration for their counterparts in a German school because they were speaking to them in a second language. They worked extraordinarily hard, drafting and re-drafting their scripts to get them as accurate as possible, to make it as easy as possible for their friends to understand what they were saying to them. This had an enormous impact on their motivation and learning. They concentrated for long periods of time on their productions, staying completely focused. As well as improving their mother tongue, like all the participants, they shared the cultural understanding that was embedded in their audiovisual exchanges.

On another occasion, visiting one of the English schools revealed the class trying to share one of their English lesson's with their European partners. At the back of the classroom they had placed a video camera on a tripod so that it could produce a long shot of the teacher and class. Just in front of the camera they placed a chair. During the English class the young learners would quietly slip into the chair and a close-up would replace the long shot, with the young person commenting on what was happening. The comments ranged from academic analysis and explanation to personal descriptions about what they were feeling or thinking about producing a fascinating video letter.

The head teachers also communicated via video letters, which can be seen in *Images and Sounds Audiovisual Language* Chapter 5 Annotation 7: European Cultural and Language Audiovisual Project – Hello Europe - Caio Europa.

Topics for the audiovisual letters - using the framework for audiovisual composing

The first audiovisual exchanges between the schools showed the young people introducing themselves and sharing aspects of their school life. They selected the locations where they wanted to be seen, what they would wear and what they would say about themselves. The environment was significant to how they wanted to be represented. They were implicitly aware of the meanings created by physical space. As one girl climbed onto a statue in her town square, a friend took a low angle photograph of her reaching for the sky. They did not explicitly understand how this would contribute to revealing who they were, but it felt right. With more advanced skills in audiovisual composing they would realize that, for instance, the sense of elevation that they were feeling, created a sense of elation when being viewed. Standing in front of the statue supplied planes: a low angle looking up at someone created a sense of power: while a wide shot provided a panorama that revealed the context of the town square surrounding the statue. Already, the groundings in the generative, physical base layer for audiovisual composing could be seen working.

In trying to show their school the students were panning, tilting and moving into and around the spaces - down the corridors into classrooms, the library or computer room. Planes and angles created the interesting imagery as they captured their environment and the panoramas provided context for the more detailed close-ups. The young learners were not completely in control of these concepts, but they were slowly learning audiovisual composing. Panning and tilting a video camera involved them in the transition - from stillness to movement. For tape-slide compositions the young learners photographed places in their school from different distances and angles, then using more than one slide projector and superimposing one image through the next, as in diaporamas, created movement. The young people were experiencing the physical base layer with its groundings and transitions.

Audiovisual letters about their schools began to develop more complex audiovisual composing. In some cases they used a classmate, in front of camera, showing and telling about where they were going and what they were seeing. This activity incorporated the social *meta* layer for audiovisual composing, whereby the participants were social agents facilitating the semantic, visual and transactional relations between themselves (as story makers and characters in the story) and their audience (their European partners). It was possible to observe the young people in the processes of narration, direction, performance, cinematography, editing, and creating the soundtrack. Sound tracks were easily facilitated by the creation of two audio tapes (for tape slide) and using two sound tracks (for video), one in the mother tongue and one in the foreign language. The young people often added music and sound effects as well as the 'voice-overs' and 'live' speech to the video.

The second exchange enabled the young people to show and tell each other about their towns, exploring where they went and what they did in their recreational time.

This required the students' to use the conceptual *synthetic* layer in audiovisual composing. They began the process using experience, ideas, imagination, intuition, reason and knowledge for creating and building audiovisual stories. They began to discover how particular contents take specific forms, in shaping a story: drawing on such story processes as – narrative strategies, structures, codes, conventions and techniques; and the needs for linking scenes in (linear and non-linear) sequences.

The next exchange was about home life with young people taking the cameras home and recording and editing an evening at home. In some cases a small group of young people would go to one of their classmate's homes and for example, watch and discuss television or make music together. These experiences would be video recorded. Usually, the audiovisual letter would contain only the colloquial talk between friends. With more time, and today's digital capacity for recording and editing video, they could have developed a commentary that went with these experiences, reinforcing another kind of more formal, analytical and reflective discourse.

Later on, they made audiovisual letters about the ways they were taught various subjects, about various cultural events taking place in their local areas and about a range of issues that they chose to explore together, for example, popular music, sports, relationships, special interests and hobbies.

Composing in images and sounds and audiovisual letters

The young learners used tape-slide presentations and video for their audiovisual correspondence. Initially, the kinds of audiovisual compositions that they created looked and sounded like educational documentaries. They were quite formal, trying to imitate the ways in which established educational audiovisual materials were composed. However, gradually, with increased confidence, the young people began to produce audiovisual letters, which became less formal in structure and began to reveal a range of discourses and cultural insights.

Of course some difficulties arose in using audiovisual composing. Not only in using images and sounds as expressive repertoires of expressive forms and techniques; but also in the use of such technologies as tape-slide and video due to the lack of expertise in the schools. Unfortunately, this project took place before young people could have access to digital camcorders and editing software packages, distributed through the Internet. So audiovisual letters had to be posted to each other, which meant long delays between communicating and getting a response. However, given these difficulties, the pilot project did demonstrate that there was a value in young people corresponding with each other.

The exposure to images and sounds in everyday life and the ways in which they are captured and manipulated within film and television supported the young peoples capacity to create video letters. Throughout the project, the audiovisual correspondence grew in complexity, in content and form, underpinned by the generative layers for audiovisual composing.

Learning gains

The process of creating audiovisual compositions, as explained earlier, involves young people in a range of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, all valuable in European language learning. The fact that these communication skills were being exercised for a product (audiovisual letter) that would be sent to other young people added to the motivation to engage and succeed in other languages. Sound tracks were produced in English and the mother tongue of the corresponding school, either German or Italian. So each group of young people could send and receive an audiovisual correspondence, in each other's language. Added to this, one group of young people with learning difficulties from Britain exchanged only in English with a group of young people for whom English was their second language in Germany. This increased the motivation of the English group to produce good work because they respected the fact that they were corresponding with peers who were using a second language.

Regarding cultural understanding, very briefly, young people discovered that they had many things in common and were very interested to see where, and how, their partners lived. They asked one another many questions and in the process increased their understanding about each other. They shared humour, music, various interests and different ways of doing some things. It was an ongoing process; but in such a small pilot project it was only possible to conjecture that a deeper understanding of one another was taking place.

Such audiovisual correspondence was not without some interesting educational issues. For instance, it was quite disturbing for some teachers, trying to teach their young people English, to realize that English young people do not speak textbook English. There was also the question of regional accents in modern language learning.

One of the professors at the German university concerned with education and, in particular language learning, said that, " The importance of the project lies in that it overcomes one of the greatest handicaps of conventional foreign languages instruction namely its artificiality, its lack of realism. If we postulate communicative competence as the ability to use the foreign language for the purpose of communication as the supreme objective of our language learning then it is of course a great disadvantage if the pupils have to exercise this competence always in what I would call 'as if' situations. Now let me delineate the considerable advantages, which an exchange of audiovisual materials between classes in England and classes in Germany can bring to foreign language learning. If direct communication with English speaking partners possibly on a visit to Britain will always be the rare exception then communication through audiovisual media is the best alternative. The verbal communication is not direct, this would necessitate an immediate confrontation with a partner (this project took place before social media where virtual oral and visual communication is direct.): but it has the other characteristic of communication, it is meaningful, purposeful, use of the language. The messages are not conveyed directly they are recorded, but they are recorded for the purpose of information for others for whom the message is transmitted. Thus the pupils use the foreign language for the best reason there can be, for the primary purpose of language, namely exchange of information for real communication so their learning becomes meaningful for them, which is of course vital for their motivation. They produce language conscious

of the fact that their utterances will be listened to, by others who are interested in the message that they have to convey. What the pupils are doing with the foreign language becomes suddenly relevant beyond the classroom, the 'as if' situation is dissolved and real life determines the pupils verbal activities. No wonder that the pupils in the first phase of this project were so motivated and were so enthusiastic when they received an answer to the message that they had sent across the channel. Another important aspect is the combination of verbal utterances from cassettes or tapes with literal images on slides. I find this combination in the form of tape slides an ideal combination because within it one medium supports the other. What pupils cannot say in words they can express in pictures and visa versa, thus a lot of information can be transmitted and the pupils did have a lot to say and take pictures of. The two media complement one another so to speak and this in a technically rather simple form, feasible for any teacher and any class, which again leaves a lot of room for creativity. To sum up I find that this project among other things makes an important contribution to the promotion of foreign language learning and through this to the promotion of international understanding".

Teachers, all over the world, take the responsibility for educating each new generation. The work is crucial for the development of social and economic success everywhere, however, they are often unsung hero's rarely getting the appreciation they deserve. The audiovisual Annotation: *European Cultural and Language project – Hello Europe - Caio Europa*, in Chapter 5, shows some of the participants and a little of the activity that took place: the rich cultural similarities and differences between Italy, Germany and Britain can be recognized, understood and celebrated: and demonstrates how, when using audiovisual composing, cultures can be revealed and languages shared.