

Making Media That Matters In Minutes

How MemeFILMS Merges Media Education and Video Production ... and How You Can, too!

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a tiny bit of information – a word, an image, a phrase, a logo
– transmitted virally through media channels...

Who is MemeFILMS?

As a media literacy educator, **Dr. Rob Williams** works extensively with young people in and out of classroom. Director/cameraman/producer **James Valastro** brings more than sixteen years of camera, lighting, and filmmaking experience to his production work, from concept to completion.

For more MemeFILMS information, visit www.MemeFILMS.org

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by Rob Williams, Ph.D.

HERE'S A PUZZLE FOR YOU ... Imagine walking into a classroom full of the latest video production gear: Mac G4 laptop with a 200 gig external drive, a three-chip professional camera and monitor, LCD projector, stage lights, boom poles, and shotgun and wireless microphones to match. Even better — this same room is full of young people, and they, in turn, are full of energy, creativity, and ideas. Some of these kids like to act, others are writers, while still others are interested in all things technical. Most of them like to laugh, and all of them love media: music, movies, video games, magazines and the like. You have a whole day, or one morning, or maybe only an hour, to make movies with this group, using only the gear, talent and time you have available.

Now what do you do?

This is a familiar challenge for all of us who make media with children and teens. Questions abound. How to render order out of chaos? How to channel our kids' fabulous ideas in workable directions with the limited time and money at our disposal? How can we use media to teach about media? How can we make a movie that is actually watch-able (and isn't about skate-boarding?)

Now, step back for a moment. As anyone who hangs out with American kids will tell you, our children are growing up in the most media-saturated society in world history. In many ways, this is exciting news, as podcasting, web blogs, IM'ing, e-gaming, and digital video production offer unprecedented opportunities for kids to express themselves and tell

their own stories.

The flip side, of course, is more ominous — a handful of multinational media conglomerates own the companies and outlets that produce and distribute most of our media content targeted at children. And make no mistake — I use the word "target" deliberately. Each week, American kids spend more money on more stuff than any other single consumer group, and corporate advertisers and brand marketers work ceaselessly to influence children's youthful consumer tastes, build their budding brand loyalties (often around sugar, soda, alcohol, tobacco, and other addictive products), and separate them from their money.

As a result, our children are influenced by a diet of as many as 3,000 discrete corporate commercial messages daily via the Internet, television, video games, mass magazines, and other forms of corporately-owned media that shape "popular" youth culture. While young people impress adults with their "tech-savvy" skills (many parents I know let their kids program their iPods), our children often don't fully appreciate media's power to shape their thinking and behavior, especially with regard to the consumer-based, civic-minded, and health-related choices that accompany childhood and adolescence.

This paradoxical situation poses an important challenge for all of us who work with community media and young people. As our children grow up in the world's most mediated society, how can we as educators and independent media produc-

ers nudge our kids to become more critical media consumers, more active media makers and more engaged citizens?

HERE IN VERMONT, MemeFILMS has been experimenting with this question for more than three years. I first met veteran videographer James Valastro in 2001, as a media educator new to Vermont interested in learning more about digital video production. As we “talked story” — about media, raising our kids, and our common interest in making movies — James expressed a concern I’ve heard from so many 21st century parents: how does anyone raise children to truly appreciate media’s power in the midst of such a rapidly changing and corporately-controlled media culture?

After putting our heads together, we created MemeFILMS to work together — mixing together media literacy education (teaching individuals how to better access, analyze and evaluate media) and digital video production — and then began building working relationships with schools and nonprofits whose media-related interests overlapped our own. During the past three years, we’ve partnered with a wide variety of organizations around the state, from individual K-12 public school classrooms to the state Department of Health. We’ve also worked within a variety of time constraints, too, from “1 shot” forty-minute classes (yes, you can make some good media in a short period of time) to week-long summer camps.

We’ve not made any money doing this, as our work is mostly funded by small grants from struggling schools and nonprofits. But while our means are modest, our goals are ambitious. What we seek is to provide young people with the knowledge and skills to understand important media-related consumer, civic, and health issues — tobacco and alcohol target marketing, body image/self-esteem issues, voting and citizen participation, to name but three — that directly impact their lives. We also seek to give kids the chance to co-create media with us — as actors, writers, directors, producers, and editors.

In making and distributing digital

video that both entertains and educates, MemeFILMS focuses on both the educational “process” — how media are “constructed” and how we can understand the many ways media influence us — and the media “product,” designing high-quality digital video that holds viewers’ attention and interest. In this way, MemeFILMS tries to create media that benefits its creators (the young people and the schools with whom we work) and also can be distributed through larger networks — community cable TV networks, statewide nonprofit networks, the Internet, and “world premieres” at local movie theaters.

Before we start shooting video, we begin with media education (visit the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME)’s web site at www.acmecoalition.org to access more media education information and resources). Teaching young people to have fun asking critical questions about existing media is an important first step in engaging kids in the need for and importance of creating their own independent stories. A Super Bowl 2005 movie trailer for Adam Sandler and Chris Rock’s film *The Longest Yard*, for example, becomes a lesson in editing, camera angles, and FX (as well as other production techniques). The trailer doubles as a vehicle for exploring stylized comedic violence and Hollywood pimping for tobacco industry product placement (both prevalent themes in corporate commercial media culture).

Once we explore some popular texts and basic questions with kids, we move on to brainstorming ideas for our own projects. As filmmakers, we walk into every class with our own ideas, and encourage our students to share theirs. Often, a good project grows out of the dialogue we have with students. And, like life, every MemeFILMS’ working arrangement and experience evolves differently, as the rules of engagement are never exactly the same.

The most important thing, though, is to get kids thinking and involved; first,

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MemeFILMS set design with our 6th grade First Assistant Director

by getting them to think more critically about media, and then, by channeling their thinking into the creation of entertaining video projects that educate how media work on us. Sometimes, kids will do the shooting, while we assist. Other times, we'll do the primary shooting, with kids assisting as boom operators, cable wranglers, A.D.s, and, of course, doing much of the writing and all of acting.

In addition to teaching the basics of video production (camera work, lighting, sound, etc.) we follow three cardinal rules for video production, making MemeFILMS that are:

1. **Short:** We keep most of our projects short. (30 seconds to 3 minutes seems an ideal length). Like many of us, kids dream big, but then get frustrated when they can't execute their ideas. We start by limiting the time length of any MemeFILMS project. This eliminates a ton of needless energy expended on unworkable ideas that are simply impossible to film with the amount of time and money available.
2. **Simple:** We strive to keep all of our concepts simple. Squeeze as much as you can, for example, out of a single statistic (Here are two: teens see as many as 3,000 ad messages a day, while six Big Media corporations own as much as 90% of children's media content). Challenge kids to do a lot with a little. This also makes editing a snap — do most of your (pre) production work on site, rather than in the editing room (unless you have the time and money to spend on editing programs like iMovie, Final Cut, or Avid).
3. **Sophisticated:** We don't need a billion dollar budget to create media that is "layered" and inter-

esting to watch. We use camera angles and motion, ambient noise and special sounds, whip pans, lighting, simple FX, funky settings (bathrooms are always fun) to hold a viewer's attention. And showing students how to play with "audience attention" gets them excited about coming up with easy and creative ways to tell the story.

Instead of using storyboards (blasphemy in many production circles, I know), we've bottled a number of MemeFILMS "prototypes" — simple field-tested formulas that offer kids various ways to conceptualize and structure their projects — and we've made these prototypes available in both text and video formats. One of our earliest and most successful prototypes, called "The Rant," featured a young woman walking and talking about how the tobacco industry uses media to target kids. (You can use "The Rant" prototype with kids to tackle ANY topic of interest to them). Another early experiment led to the "The Appeal," featuring a young man, framed by patriotic bunting on a baseball diamond, talking directly to tobacco industry executives and asking them to "please stop targeting us." Kids' voices are more powerful than they (and we) realize. Having students talk directly to parents, or corporate executives, or advertisers is empowering, and makes for powerful media, too.

HOW DO WE DISTRIBUTE OUR FILMS? Any way we can. I use our Memes in both DVD and QuickTime movie formats to educate kids in the media literacy education workshops and keynotes I give all over the country. Many of our MemeFILMS are aired on Vermont's community cable TV outlets; we've even had PEG producers compress our videos for hosting at their web sites! (Kids like this, because then they can call friends and relatives and share the URL link — movie stars in cyberspace!) We also use MemeFILMS video experiences to create entire "awards shows" for school auditoriums full of kids. This past winter, we designed an entire "Oscars"-type awards assembly — "Butts of Holly-

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MemeFILMS filming high school voices at a statewide leadership summit

wood” — for a local high school, featuring student MCs and a “live via satellite” feel. Eight Hundred kids attended the assembly, had fun, laughed a bunch, and learned how tobacco corporations use Hollywood product placement to increase kids’ interest in smoking — a “win win” for everyone (except the Marlboro guys).

Our favorite method of distribution involves creating a “world premiere” movie event of our student films, either (ideally) in a local movie theater or a big screen auditorium, and inviting local TV news crews, school and select board members, parents, state politicians and health officials to attend. Plenty of publicity — including posters and press releases to local and state media outlets and phone calls to key community leaders — helps ensure a big turnout. Our youth film-makers dress up and walk down the red carpet, bathed in bright lights and camera flash “pops” from the crowd, followed by a community screening of our films and a “meet and greet” with food and drink afterwards. This is a fine way to honor students’ work, and educate parents and entire communities about the important relationship between media education and video production.

You can get a taste for MemeFILMS’ prototypes at our web site, and we’ve also packaged them on DVDs for easy and affordable access. Here are four different ways you can use the MemeFILMS prototypes to enhance your own media education and video production work.

1. **Educational tools:** Explore the Meme prototypes, in conjunction with ACME’s “Questioning Media” principles, to teach the basics of media literacy education, including: the general principles of media education, methods for media analysis/ deconstruction, product placement, focus group testing, and basic facts that illustrate how our media culture works.

2. **Production prototypes:** Explore the Meme prototypes, in conjunction with Meme’s web-driven production notes, to teach the basics of video production: camera motion, field sound, SPFX, lighting, blocking, script-writing, acting and directing.
3. **Examples of youth activism:** Share MemeFILMS prototypes (many of which have aired all over Vermont on community cable television and in movie theaters) to illustrate young people having fun challenging the media status quo.
4. **Entertaining movies:** Show MemeFILMS prototypes to remind kids that making media can be exciting, rewarding, and fun!

Consider that the most memorable media — TV commercials, movie trailers and the like — are very simple... In the end, the MemeFILMS formula is also very simple. What we do is to combine truth, humor, honesty, and the voices of our youth with accessible but powerful video production methods. We make Memes in very short time frames, design them for editing ease, and use them to impact whole communities.

Ultimately, the most fascinating aspect of our work has been the wonderful sense of spontaneous experimentation that results when you give communities permission to play with video. Making and distributing media that matters in minutes is essential work for all of us seeking a more democratic and humane media culture.

And, it’s heaps of fun, too!



MemeFILMS’ James Valastro and Vermont 6th graders with their smoke-free trophies: Flushing Big Tobacco

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