Students and teachers alike are enthralled by the Flip Video camcorder, an easy-to-use project tool that is charging up the classroom in a way not seen since the arrival of the iPod.

- By Katherine Grayson
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It’s a typical school day and as you deliver the class lesson for the afternoon you conduct a mental scan of your students and their attention quotients. Two girls at the back of the room are whispering to each other; the boy in front of them is slumped forward in his seat, chin resting on knuckles, eyes glazed. Off to your right, another boy has just yawned and dropped his pencil for, by your count, the fourth time in 30 minutes, while the little blonde to your left is earnestly doodling. It’s about time to lay out the details of the next class project—a local field trip that would normally be expanded in report-and-poster format—and you’re preparing yourself for the questions that have managed to miss the gray matter between all of those inattentive ears.

This time, however, things will be different: For this project, you announce to the class, the students will group themselves into teams, each team creating a well-researched, four-minute video complete with titles, stills, and even theme music.

Heads pop up, backs straighten, eyes once again register life within as you hand out colorful little plastic boxes with irresistible round buttons placed front and center, right below what look like mini TV screens.

“Oh wow!” several students exclaim. “Cool!” squeal a few others. You know, at last, that you’ve hit on something big: the tiny, spunky Flip Video camcorder.

“There are quiet students sitting in classrooms right now capable of all kinds of artistic expression,” says Rushton Hurley, who teaches Japanese at Wilcox High School in Santa Clara, CA, and is the executive director of Next Vista for Learning, an online library of free educational videos by and for teachers and students worldwide. Using video for learning projects, Hurley believes, can set that energy loose. “Given the chance to express themselves via a mode that excites them,” he says, “students would show just how well they can learn.”

Here Comes the Competition

Flip Video challengers were late arriving. The first, from Kodak, didn’t emerge until fall 2008, and more came forward the following spring, according to market researcher NPD Group (npdgroup.com). Many are pricier and may not include a USB connector or additional memory cards. But analysts say some of the little camcorders are moving up fast and are worth checking out, most notably Kodak’s Zi6 and RCA’s Small Wonder. Head to the websites below to size up the competition.

Aiptek A-HD Camcorder (aiptek.com)
Creative Vado HD Pocket Video Cam (us.creative.com)
DXG Camcorders (dxgusa.com)
Kodak Zi6 Pocket Video Camera (kodak.com)
RCA Small Wonder (mysmallwonder.com)
Sony WebbieHD (sonytvde.com)
Toshiba Camileo S10 PocketCam (toshiba.com)

Of course, video equipment, like any number of audiovisual tools that can be reserved and shared in the school setting, has been around for some time, and many schools have employed the technology for specific classes and for project-based learning (PBL). But it’s not always the user-friendliest gear, and it can be cumbersome and costly as well. Enter the Flip Video digital camcorder.

“The Flips are much easier to use, and that’s the One Big Whopping Thing,” Hurley says. “For almost any technology tool the question becomes, ‘What’s the hassle factor?’ Let’s face it: Capturing footage with a normal camcorder takes patience. That is a big hassle; it’s a barrier to using digital camcorders. But so many difficulties are taken away with the Flip.”

Hurley calls Flip’s signature pop-out USB arm, which differentiates the device from any that came before it, “a monster advantage. It allows someone to easily get footage into a computer. You just plug the USB port in and suddenly you’re in. Some educators don’t even know that these are available to make videos, or that they can get two for $150.”

Singlehandedly, much as Apple’s iPod impacted education when it captured its market, the Flip has made video possible for even the most reticent student or tech-wary instructor. Yet, for all the teachers around the globe turning to the website Digital Wish to solicit donations for their proposed video projects, just hoping for a supply of Flip Videos, there are many more unaware of the endless PBL possibilities the devices present.

The Project Enabler

“The Flip camcorder is such a great way to get students active and engaged in their learning,” says Sarah Lifka, a graduate student in elementary education at William & Mary and a contributor to Connexions, a website where educators participate in a free exchange of ideas and resources.

In her work as a student teacher at a local elementary school, Lifka has her fifth-graders use the device for any number of learning projects, such as creating video trailers for books they are reading, making movies about famous events in history, or even sharing science demonstrations with their peers and other classes. She also suggests using the Flips to make videos about such topics as recycling, to share with younger students who can benefit from the visual display of new skills. And, though it’s not necessarily a project-based exercise, Lifka even encourages instructor use of the device to aid petitions to the local school board for Flips or other new equipment that can aid in classroom project work, such as a document camera.

All the way across the country, at Mission High School in San Francisco, Peer Resource Coordinator Jennifer Colker uses Flip camcorders to help students produce the wildly popular in-house series Mission Youth TV. Produced in three languages and broadcast on the school’s website, MYTV informs Mission High constituents and families, and anyone else

Digital Video

Flippin Out -- THE Journal
http://thejournal.com/Articles/2010/03/01/Flippin-Out.aspx?p=1
interested, about goings-on at the school.

**Purchase Options**

**Flip Products to Consider**

Prices below for the various Flip models are MSRP. Special teacher/educational institution pricing is available through the Flip Video’s distribution partner, Digital Wish (digitalwish.com), including a two-for-one offer for the Ultra (digitalwish.com/dw/digitalwish/product/id=4310), and Flip Video Spotlight (flipvideospotlight.com), which also offers special training and networking materials.

- **MinoHD:** 120 minutes of recording time, $229.99
- **MinoHD:** 60 minutes of recording time, $199.99
- **Mino:** 60 minutes of recording time, $149.99
- **UltraHD:** 120 minutes of recording time, $199.99
- **Ultra:** 120 minutes of recording time, $149.99

“Our holiday episode was awesome,” Colker says. She describes students’ use of such accessories as music, costuming, special effects, and subtitling to create a special video show in which the students explain the various ways they observe the holidays—Christmas, Hanukkah, Ramadan, Kwanzaa, and Diwali—fostering greater understanding across cultures and bringing the student body closer together. The weekly show, shot entirely on Flips, also offers viewers a rundown of sports happenings, college acceptance updates, and current events, plus photos taken by a roving cameraperson, which encourages students to tune in to see themselves and learn more about their school community and the world. The sizable number of students involved in MYTV as reporters, producers, translators, actors, and in various other jobs is an indication of the degree to which the project has engaged the school.

Then there’s Bob Wood, a teacher at Oakridge High School in Muskegon, MI, who got his PBL inspiration traveling through the Middle East last summer with a Flip. “I did many three-to-five-minute interviews with people I met, all with the intention of bringing their words back into my classroom,” he says. It got Wood thinking about how to use the device for projects with his graduating seniors in his Senior Current Issues class, and he soon decided it could help them “take a closer look at themselves, their values, and their future at this pivotal time in their lives.”

So Wood introduced his “Flip It” project (“shaped entirely with student input,” he says) in which students’ friends or family members conduct four interviews with them throughout their senior year. Each interview is accompanied by an evaluation assignment that delves into attitudes, future outlook, and student-determined topics such as “Should I Vote?” and “Gay or Straight, Does It Matter?” wrapping up with a final segment, “Where Do I Go From Here?” On Digital Wish, Wood is lobbying for multiple Flips so his students can check them out for a couple of days at a time to complete the periodic interviews.

One of the more compelling uses of the devices can be found at James F. Byrnes High School in Duncan, SC, where Spanish instructor Trixi DeRosa-Davis uses Flips in working with her students to create their own episodes of Extr@ Spanish, an educational TV series that ran on British television in the early 2000s. DeRosa-Davis says videos of the show are housed on Discovery Education Streaming, so students can watch the old shows throughout the semester in advance of producing their own.

“Students love seeing themselves on camera,” she writes on Digital Wish. She suggests to teachers who use her lesson plan to send their students’ videos to elementary schools “to share on Discovery Education Streaming, so students can watch the old shows throughout the semester in advance of producing their own.

And at Spaght Multimedia Magnet in Wichita, KS, teacher Dana Oswald has plans to use the Flips for her “Animal Adventures” project, which she explains on Digital Wish “is great for incorporating research skills [and] reading and writing skills.” Students in grades 4 to 6 will choose an animal at the local zoo and research many aspects of its life, classification, and habitat. After the research is complete, the students will create shooting scripts; practice with the cameras; travel to the zoo to record in front of their animals; edit the videos; with the teacher’s help, create a class movie; then premiere the film to their families during school hours.

“Those little video libraries are a very powerful and exciting medium for projects,” says Next Vista for Learning’s Hurley, adding that the videos compel students to stay engaged. “The power of the video is that anything can show up in it. It’s the power of the unexpected, and since anything can happen they have to pay attention.

“Teachers are too predictable,” he continues. “Almost any subject can be improved by capturing students’ attention early in the game, and then developing the topic.”

Hurley’s own “Lightbulbs” section on the Next Vista site offers students and teachers such Flip-produced videos as “Understanding the Periodic Table” and “Grizzly—An Endangered Species.” He also includes project lesson plans employing the Flips, such as “Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Multimedia” and “Career Exploration in Video.” The important thing, Hurley says, is to come up with a solid project plan and give students the option to work with each other: “Don’t just cut kids loose on film and see what happens.”

**Capturing the Market**

Pure Digital Technologies launched its first Flip Video product in May 2007, and the device is now the top seller in the category it invented—$200-and-under flash memory-based digital camcorders. Two of its models are the No. 1 and No. 2 sellers among all camcorders in the US, regardless of price, according to data from market researcher NPD Group. It’s no wonder that last May networking behemoth Cisco Systems purchased Pure Digital for a cool $590 million.

Since it was first introduced, the Flip has branched off into the Ultra II (1.5-inch screen, 4 GB of flashmemory), the UltraHD (shoots 30 frames per second and uses 720p encoding, just like high-definition TV broadcasts), and the Flip Mino, which made its debut in 2008 with a 60-minute recording time and is now also available as MinoHD in 60- and 120-minute varieties. Most Flip aficionados say the camera is so simple you can just peruse the start-up directions, shoot some stray video, and then let your mind race with possible PBL lesson plans.

**Site Seeing: Tips for Flips**

“How to Use Flip Cameras in the Classroom”: ehow.com/printarticle.html?id=5257011

“The Flip Camera in the Elementary School Classroom”: cnx.org/content/m32297/latest

“Forty Interesting Ways to Use Your Pocket Video Camera in the Classroom”: slideshare.net/mbelinsky/forty-interesting-ways-to-use-your-pocket-video-camera-in-the-classroom

But there will be users who know next to nothing about working with video, and the whole idea of devising a project plan or instructing students on its use terrifies them. It is for them that LiFa at William & Mary penned “The Flip Camera in the Elementary School Classroom,” a Connexions module that walks instructors through the use of the Flip, including getting started, its classroom advantages and disadvantages, and more. For an abbreviated walk-through for first-timers, look up ehow’s “How to Use Flip Cameras in the Classroom” or Creative Commons’ “Forty Interesting Ways to Use Your Pocket Video Camera in the Classroom” (see Site Seeing: “Tips for Flips,” above).

Better yet, as Hurley advises, to get started “just go to YouTube, key in what you want to know, then watch and learn.” You can even learn about tools that are related or peripheral to the pocket video cameras, he says. If you’re interested in editing tools, for instance, you can run a search for “Movie tutorial” or “Audacity tutorial”—that is, if you want to move beyond the basic functionality afforded by the onboard FlipShare software, which gives users the ability to publish and share videos online.

More assistance comes from iEarn USA, which is at the forefront of global student collaboration via video (notably, Flip Video). According to Assistant Director Lisa Jobson, the organization is in partnership with Adobe to reach out to teachers around the world to help them incorporate digital storytelling and video in their classrooms. Four online courses are being offered to 140 middle school and high school teachers worldwide—three have just been completed—to train them in how to use the technology tools and incorporate them into
lesson plans. Global project examples abound on the site as well.

What’s Next?
Cisco’s acquisition of Pure Digital Technologies is now making possible networked Flip Video camcorders as well as the ability to display video through various devices around a school, home, or other facilities. Hence, we see the latest Share products from the Flip, with assuredly more to come.

Hurley would love to see the company fill in the gap left by Photo Story’s incompatibility with Windows 7. Photo Story is a free piece of downloadable photo-editing software from Microsoft that, Hurley says, “doesn’t get a lot of attention, but teachers love it because it’s so easy to use, like the Flip. Why Microsoft hasn’t made it compatible with Windows 7 is just totally beyond me.”

The lapse could benefit Cisco, Hurley believes, if the company can tinker with the Flip editing software to boost what users can do with still images and jazz up what can be done with titles. “Right now, you can edit Flip videos just enough to take them into iMovie or Movie Maker,” he says. “But make the Flip software stronger and as easy as Photo Story, and Cisco would have a tool that every school should make available to its teachers.”

Hurley points to Apple’s efforts in the 1980s to make its products available to schools everywhere—an effort subsequently dropped, giving PCs a 10-year edge before Apple could recover. “Flip needs to take advantage of the opportunity to make sure every student has a Flip camera or is familiar with its use,” he says. The Apple analogy is not lost on former Pure Digital CEO and current Cisco Consumer Business Group Senior Vice President/General Manager Jonathan Kaplan, who has market domination in his sights. “The way Apple has revolutionized music,” he has declared, “we will revolutionize video.”

The Flip already has built-in cachet with students, in Hurley’s view. “The real metric is its cool factor: How cool is it?” he says. “When I’ve used the devices in project-based learning, I have always offered students the opportunity to do a poster instead, for the same credit. But I’ve never had a single poster submitted. Videos are just cool; posters are not.”

Students aren’t alone in that feeling, Hurley adds, and that has the power to make all the difference. “When teachers look at something and say, ‘Wow, that’s incredible! Wow, that’s easy! Wow, even I can do that!’ things will happen in their classrooms.”

Links
Adobe  adobe.com
Cisco Systems  cisco.com
Connexions  cnx.org
Digital Wish  digitalwish.com
Discovery Education Streaming  streaming.discoveryeducation.com
eHow  eHow.com
Flip Video  theflip.com
iEarn USA  us.iearn.org
Next Vista for Learning  nextvista.org
NPD Group  npdgroup.com
About the Author
Katherine Grayson is is a Los Angeles based freelance writer covering technology, education, and business issues.