



Co-Creating an Arts Curriculum in Career and Technical Education

SUMMARY

This article explores the practice of integrating English language arts into a Career and Technical Education program. The authors explain three projects that actively incorporate student interests and feedback while meeting core academic and technical standards.

Student engagement is a fickle holy grail

— what “works” so well once or twice or year after year, sometimes suddenly doesn’t. Although we may craft our lessons with students in mind, our interpretation of their motivations and challenges is often framed through the educator’s lens. Of course we have many barometers to gauge student insight, such as assessments and work samples, but to get to what engages our students, sometimes we simply need to ask.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) begins with student interest. Students self-select their program of study from what is available in their districts. Research indicates that students at risk of dropping out find school more engaging and relevant if

they participate in a CTE program combined with core academics (Plank, Deluca, & Estacion, 2005).

According to The American Institute for Research (Brand, Valent, & Browning, 2013), a high quality CTE program delivers instruction in industry-specific technical skills, core academic skills — such as ELA, math, and science — and employability skills, including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. A high quality program also provides “real-world” work experience, opportunities for local business people to provide insight, articulation agreements with postsecondary institutions, and opportunities for students to participate in youth leadership organizations. Given all of these objectives, it is necessary that the curriculum be flexible — CTE instructors have to

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combine sometimes disparate seeming content into a unified whole. Project-based learning allows CTE instructors this flexibility when designing lessons to align with the curriculum.

In New York State, CTE classes are often provided at a regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). A BOCES is an organization that provides services to component schools in order to maximize educational resources to the benefit of students and districts. There are 37 BOCES across New York State. The Delaware-Chenango-Madison-Otsego BOCES in Norwich, N.Y., offers core academic credits to eligible CTE students to allow them to meet graduation requirements and fit a CTE class into their schedule. The way in which core academic credits are allocated is favorable to flexible curriculum design. The integrated ELA credit, for example, corresponds with English 12 and is earned over two years. Thus, it is possible to devote time to long-term projects in which students can explore their interests in-depth.

It is from the CTE vantage point that we have sought to expand on the notion that student interest plays a

significant role in academic engagement. In our teaching practice, we have found that inviting students to co-create curriculum has allowed for deeper, more sustained thinking and learning. In fact, we have experienced learning outcomes that we would not have arrived at had it not been for student feedback.

The Visual Communications and Graphic Design Program (known as VisCom) is one of 12 programs offering integrated ELA credit for high school juniors and seniors and adults at the DCMO BOCES. Integration allows students to earn ELA credit within their Career and Technical Education program, so instructors look to design projects that address both the technical and ELA NYS Learning Standards. The most successful projects have been those in which students and instructors collaborate to develop curriculum.

Handing over control to the students is a gradual process. Initially, a project begins as a way to achieve a specific learning outcome. For example, the instructors may be concerned that students are not demonstrating proficiency in a particular area. Using the

continued on following page

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content standards as a blueprint, students and instructors build instruction around student interests, creating a dynamic and engaging learning environment. Ultimately, students take control of the content delivery, demonstrating higher order thinking skills. In this article, we will discuss three projects that have been successful in the visual communications classroom: a short story contest, art critiques, and design challenges.

Short-Story Contest

The short-story project began as a work experience opportunity that we used to capitalize on multiple standards. Work experience is an important component of Career and Technical Education as it prepares students to apply their technical skills to the workplace. In this particular case, our school librarian wanted to promote the book collection. In collaboration with the librarian, we decided to have students work in small groups to pitch a book to an audience. Students selected a book, redesigned the cover, and prepared an ad campaign, which included a mock-up of the cover, social media promotions, Web banners, fliers, and magazine advertisements which they presented to an audience of peers and faculty. This project addressed several technical standards for VisCom: using the

design process, creating engaging presentations, and designing for a target audience, as well as the ELA speaking and listening standards within the NYS Learning Standards.

Even though this project achieved its goals — garnering more attention for the library media center’s holdings and addressing curricular standards — we felt that there was something missing. Due to time constraints, most students had only skimmed through the books; they were not intimately connected with the text, so they were not as invested in the presentations as they could have been. Many of the “re-designed” covers offered only a slight variation on the original or had little to do with the content of the book.

Students met and exceeded expectations for design skills and presentation skills, but we knew that we could deepen this experience. We saw that if we could have students engage more deeply with a text we could easily incorporate numerous ELA skills in literary analysis. However, the text would have to be short to fit into the already packed curriculum. We felt that students should design a cover to suit something that they had read, but we wanted them to create something that didn’t already exist; we wanted them to truly interpret what they had read, not just reinterpret an existing cover. We wondered, what if students

had to market original content for an undiscovered author? Thus, we decided to run a short-story contest to generate the content.

We knew how we wanted to challenge students, and we knew what standards we wanted to address, but we left many of the particulars open. We brought the concept to students and worked as a class to determine guidelines for the contest, including publication and promotional strategies. Students decided that Facebook would be the medium for promotion; users would vote for which stories they liked best based on the advertising campaign. Five stories would be selected for publication; the winner's cover art would be featured in color on the front of the book.

This project developed in many stages. Students designed fliers and newspaper ads to promote the contest. Using a collaborative Google Doc, the class created a rubric by which to evaluate the story submissions. Once the pile had been narrowed down to the top 15 stories or so, we assigned them to small groups. As the students read through their stories, we were impressed with their analytical discussions. Groups were eager to share their stories with one another, arguing literary merit by referring to specific uses of literary devices. In more traditional literature classrooms it can be difficult to move students from summary to

analysis. Here, they were naturally engaging in it. In terms of the NYS Learning Standards, they were:

“Analyze[ing] the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story... and analyze[ing] how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text...contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, pg. 50).”

Moving the discussion away from plot summary into literary analysis was aided by the fact that some of the plots were quite similar. To “sell” the story, groups needed to convey something other than plot to audiences. They had to ask questions like, “what is compelling about this particular iteration of *Twilight* fan fiction?” In addition, the purpose was very clear — convince others to vote up the story for publication. It didn't matter if the groups liked the stories that they were working on; it mattered if others did.

Next, we began to design covers for the top 15 stories. The students felt empowered by having participated in the voting process and they began to furiously design covers. During the promotion phase, students were able

continued on following page

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to meet deadlines — missing deadlines meant less exposure and a diminished chance of being published. The students determined the measure of success and worked to satisfy themselves, not a teacher's agenda. The completed covers were posted on the class Facebook page along with teaser copy about each story. Each group managed their own social media campaign with minimal teacher influence. Instructors merely checked posts for grammar and appropriateness.

The small group work during this project resulted in what Darling-Hammond, et al. refer to as “productive collaboration” (2008, p. 26–27). Students were accountable to one another as individuals. Since the task required multiple components to be successful, students worked to their individual strengths. For example, one student might take to the role of social media expert and orchestrate the online campaign, whereas another student might have more expertise with page layout.

Since the design of the cover art was left up to each group, students played to their strengths with this as well. Ultimately, we had covers that were hand-drawn illustrations, photographs, Photo-shopped images, computer drawn-illustrations; essentially, students felt free to pull from the many techniques that they had learned in the VisCom classroom. Further, group

members were not just accountable to themselves but to the author whom they represented. The goal for all students was the same, but they had myriad ways to get to the goal. The covers had to be representative of a specific story, encouraging each group to produce a unique work. Throughout this process, students were given the authority to manage their workflow — autonomy which is one essential component for productive collaboration (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2008).

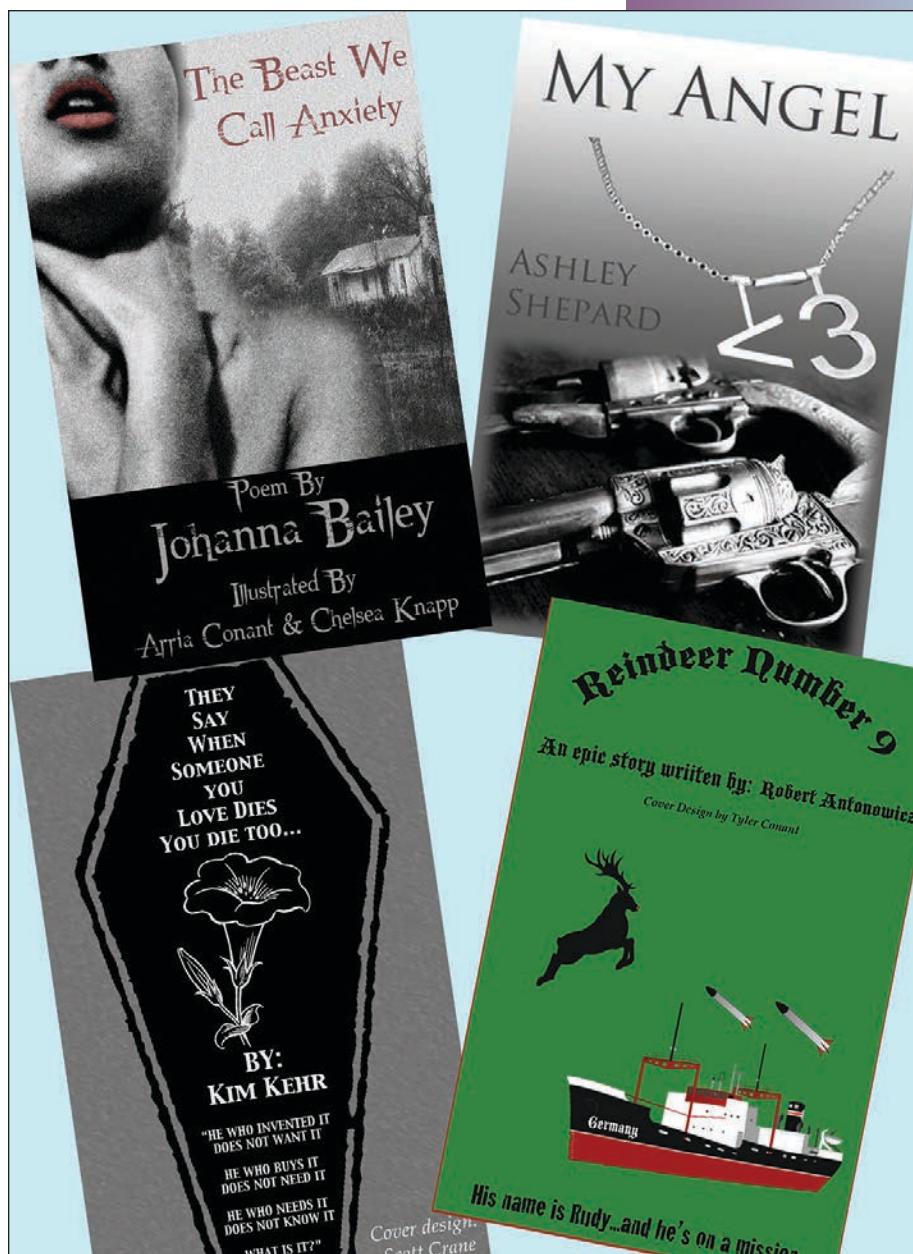
Once the voting process ended, we had five stories for publication. The illustration for the winning story was featured on the anthology cover. Every student writer who made it into the top 15 received a certificate of participation. Winners received two copies of the anthology, one for themselves and one for their school library. Even after the contest ended, the visual communications students found ways to branch out from the original project. Several students included their cover art in their portfolios and critiqued their own work during portfolio review (portfolio review is part of the mid-term exam in this course). Some students entered their artwork in the DCMO BOCES Media Festival and placed. One student saw the anthologies as a potential class fundraiser and offered copies for a donation at our open house. Choosing to share their work with the broader school community is evidence that students felt an attachment to their school;

they were invested in their education, an important factor in overall school success (Plank, Deluca, & Estacion, 2005).

This project was rich with learning opportunities. Each student had thoroughly read 10–15 short stories without even seeming to realize that they were reading. They compared and contrasted stories to find the ones with which they most connected. They had heated debates of critical analysis. (One student even reported reading stories over the phone to her boyfriend to get his take.) They designed artwork that spoke to the thematic impressions of the stories. All of these activities happened with very little intervention from the instructors — we put the project in their laps and stepped back. We asked guiding questions as much to deepen the conversation as to share in the excitement about the project. We served as mentors and provided students with relevant resources to help them succeed in this project, another key factor in productive collaboration (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2008).

Art Critiques

Art critiques are another example of beginning with a standards-based framework filled in by the students. Being a designer means having a working understanding of design principles such as balance, rhythm, emphasis and unity, as well as being able to



maximize those principles to meet a customer's vision.

Many of our high school students draw what they like, and a declaration of "I like it" is where analysis ends. However, a careful critique of

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Short-story collage

Co-Creating an Arts Curriculum in Career and Technical Education

technique can allow designers to grow as artists. In a more concrete sense, the vocabulary for design principles and elements is also a part of the formal assessment in the class, the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) exam, as well as a key part of Standard 3 of the NYS Learning Standards for Visual Art.

We began our lesson by walking students step-by-step through a critique: description, formal analysis, reflection. We found a comprehensive lesson on the ArtsEdge website which used works from the Museum of Modern Art, and modified it for our class. The grade band on the original lesson was fifth through eighth grade, but we found that our high school students were unfamiliar with key vocabulary in the lesson and found the writing challenging. Using whole group instruction, we walked students through each section of the critique. Within each section, students worked in smaller groups to complete a chunk of the bigger lesson.

For example, in the descriptive part of the activity, the students are asked to list parts of speech that come to mind when they view the artwork. We found that students needed a refresher on verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. After a brief mini-lesson on parts of speech, we assigned small groups to concentrate on one part of speech, providing this information to the entire class through discussion. The

culminating activity for this structured lesson was a three-paragraph critique, pulling together information that we had generated as a class. During the lesson, students were able to apply technical vocabulary to a discussion of the topic.

The next step in this process was to give students a chance to practice analysis independently. We provided them with a picture of a famous painting and asked them to perform the same process as they had done in the full class — description, formal analysis, reflection. The resulting assignment was worlds away from the full class activity. Most students completed one or two of the steps; very few did all three. Despite having written a paragraph for the guided lesson, many students skipped this requirement as well, simply jotting down words and phrases.

The assignment for the independent practice did not vary from the guided practice, so we had to ask ourselves why students found the assignment so difficult. We felt that engagement was the issue — students just did not seem interested in these famous works of art. Perhaps they were even alienated by them. Knowing that students created art based on their own internal motivations and moods, we decided to focus instead on student-generated work such as sketches that the students had hand drawn or created in a program like Illustrator. We hoped that

focusing internally first would help students to focus outwardly later.

We implemented weekly student critique. We invited a student to select a piece that he or she wanted to share with the group. We projected the artwork at the front of the room and asked the class to complete a critique — using the same process that had been previously taught. Students who were in the spotlight were also exempt from writing the critique for that day — this fact turned out to be an incentive for many. Once students wrote their critiques, volunteers shared their ideas. Finally, the artist explained the piece from his or her own perspective. After the instructors reviewed the critiques, they were passed back to the artist for inclusion in his or her portfolio. By the end of the school year, we critiqued at least one piece from every student.

At the beginning of the peer critique process, we had to frequently guide students, reminding them of design vocabulary and prompting them on the next section of the review. They might ask questions like, “What is unity again?” “What do you mean by reflection?” Even, “How long does this have to be?” Over time, students began to take control of the discussion, and we were able to observe their process, engaging in the discussion as fellow art critics only. Students were using design vocabulary fluently and purposefully. They were effortlessly

meeting Standard 3 of the NYS Learning Standards for Visual Arts by “reflect[ing] on, interpret[ing], and evaluat[ing] works of art, using the language of art criticism” (University of the State of New York—New York State Education Department, 2009, Standard 3 section, para. 5).

Students were also building on their reflections — sometimes trying to be as outrageous as possible to get a laugh from their peers. No one balked at writing the reviews or sharing their observations. Most notably, a student in the class who had tests read and often needed classroom assignments scribed, wanted to write the critiques independently and share them with the class. Students were clamoring to be the next person to have work reviewed. In fact, once we had gotten through all students, we were able to begin a second go-round. The writing also began to improve as students demonstrated thinking on a deeper level. The following samples are excerpts from one student’s first critique and his last.

Sample 1:


“The use of lines makes it look like she’s blushing. they (sic) are squigly (sic) in her hair, makes it move, shaded lines under her chin, emphasis is used definitaley (sic). She is smiling.

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Co-Creating an Arts Curriculum in Career and Technical Education

<p>Name: _____ VisCom</p> <p>Writing a Critique</p> <p>Description: Describe the work without using value words like "ugly" or "beautiful." Begin by stating the title and artist(s) then turn two or more of the following into complete sentences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the written description on the label or in the program about the work?• When and where was the work created?• Describe the elements of the work (i.e., line movement, light, space).• Describe the technical qualities of the work (i.e., tools, materials, instruments).• Describe the subject matter. What is it all about? Are there recognizable images? <p>Description:</p>	<p>Name: _____ VisCom</p> <p>Writing a Critique</p> <p>Interpretation: Describe how the work makes you think or feel. Write complete sentences to answer two or more of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the expressive qualities you find in the work. What expressive language would you use to describe the qualities (i.e., tragic, ugly, funny)?• Does the work remind you of other things you have experienced (i.e., analogy or metaphor)?• How does the work relate to other ideas or events in the world and/or in your other studies? <p>Interpretation:</p>
<p>Analysis: Describe how the work is organized as a complete composition. Write complete sentences to answer two or more of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is the work constructed or planned (i.e., lines, shapes)?• Identify some of the similarities throughout the work (i.e., repetition of lines, shapes, colors).• Identify some of the points of emphasis in the work (i.e., specific scene, figure, focal point).• If the work has subjects or characters, what are the relationships between or among them? <p>Analysis:</p>	<p>Put it together: Use your sentences from above to write a unified, cohesive paragraph. At the end of the paragraph, you may also include your evaluation of the work by answering one of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What qualities of the work make you feel it is a success or failure?• Compare it with similar works that you think are good or bad.• What criteria can you list to help others judge this work?• How original is the work? Why do you feel this work is original or not original? <p>Analysis paragraph:</p>

Source: <https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/how-to/tipsheets/student-critique.aspx>



Critique collage

Sample 2:

This art piece, in my opinion, shows that haters have no face. Some people don't know, or think that they don't know any haters. Even though they could be haters themselves, or they could have

hater friends. It [the artwork] shows a deep perception on life because some people love/like haters, thinking that they motivate. Where as (sic) people that always go through that and always get bullied might see it differently. (sic).

As seen in these samples, this student's sentence structure improved. He was demonstrating abstract thought about the meaning of the picture beyond stating a preference — that he "liked it" or that it was "cool." It should also be noted that students were not graded on the mechanics of English for this assignment — students became better writers by writing more often.

Students were able to review artwork created by their peers, but would they be able to translate their analytical skills to work outside of their sphere? The test came when we took the students on a field trip to the Corning Museum of Glass. After a formal tour, students worked in groups of two or three using iPads to videotape themselves critiquing their favorite piece of art. When we returned to class the next day, we screened the videos. The critiques demonstrated the analytical skills that we had been trying to foster all along. We were also quite surprised at the quality of critiques from the second year students because they had not been a part of our new and improved critiquing strategy using student work. The first year students

were able to successfully teach the concept and expectations to the older group! Perhaps our proudest moment came when one of the tour guides told us that she was impressed with the students' use of art vocabulary as they toured the exhibits.

Our theory seemed to hold true — students needed to apply analysis to artwork with which they felt comfortable before they could talk about more complex art outside of their experience. We had been trying to introduce two new concepts at the same time — the language of art critique and the appreciation of classic works of art. When we introduce this topic again, we will begin right away with student work and come back to the samples from the Museum of Modern Art and compare results.

Design Challenges

Graphic designers have to be able to communicate with customers, to understand the vision of the client and to effectively pitch ideas. High school students in this class often design for themselves and have limited experience designing for someone else. The design challenge is a way for students to think creatively on their feet while practicing valuable presentation skills, two areas that will prove critical in establishing a career in the field of graphic design.

This assignment is another example of being able to meet the VisCom technical standards, ELA standards, and Visual Art Standards at the same time. The technical standards include: developing appropriate presentation skills, creating engaging presentations, applying appropriate sales techniques based on clients, and developing the ability to think quickly and adapt. In addition, design challenges address Standard 2 of the Visual Arts Standards as students role-play an art vocation. Finally, students are demonstrating all of their skills through the ELA NYS Learning Standards for Speaking and Listening. We cover a lot of curricular mileage with this activity and students always have fun with it.

The design challenge is dynamic, in that the specific activity is geared toward the needs of the unique group of students that is in front of us in any given year. The basic structure is simple — students are given a limited amount of time (often 30–40 minutes) to complete a design based on particular specifications. When time is up, they “pitch” their design to an audience. Students work in small groups, with each group completing a different design. Each group sets up their display in a section of the room and delivers a three-minute presentation to an audience. The audience is also broken up into smaller groups, with audience groups rotating around to each

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presentation. The presenting groups become more polished as they deliver their pitch multiple times. This structure also eases students into public presentation; they may be presenting to a large group by the end of the activity, but initially they are only speaking with four to five people at any given time.

One example of a design challenge that we have used many times is the “Failed Product.” This activity is a fitting application of instruction on truth in advertising. For this design challenge, students are given a product that was considered a failure at the time of its release, such as *Nintendo’s Virtual Boy* gaming system. This product did not catch on because gamers developed horrendous headaches while using the virtual reality goggles. Students are tasked with creating an ad campaign that gives the flaw a positive spin. The results of this task are often quite hilarious. In the past, students have created mock Virtual Boys out of construction paper, acting out the gaming experience. They pitched the headache feature to parents as a way to minimize kids’ screen time.

In every design challenge, we add a “twist” that addresses an aspect of public speaking or work ethic that we feel students need to practice. For example, students might be asked to work with a different partner or partners; an audience member might be

asked to “heckle” the presenters; a member of the group might suddenly be asked to be a part of the audience, leaving the rest of the group to present without a member. At the end of the challenge, we reconvene as a class to debrief. We discuss the twist — what it was like to work with someone new, how to handle a difficult customer, what happens when a member of the team is absent or not doing his share of the work.

Another important aspect of the twist is to gradually ease students out of their comfort zones. As they get into the habit of the design challenge and feel more comfortable working under a deadline and presenting to an audience, we can begin to challenge them further. In the past, we have invited local business people in to hear pitches, and we have had students move outside the classroom to present to people as they walk by in the hallway. Students are able to rise to these new challenges because they feel confident in the established framework of the project.

Once we have done one or two design challenges, we invite students to create their own. As with the short-story contest and the art critiques, we have used the standards to outline the activity, allowing students to provide the details. Student-developed design challenges build our curriculum library

exponentially every year. In fact, the ideas that come from the students are ideas that were not even on our radar. If we had maintained a teacher-driven curriculum, we would have cheated our students out of fun, engaging opportunities. We have never had to assign students to lead the design challenge; students approach us to make suggestions. Those in charge of the activity often take their role very seriously. They are motivated to see their idea come to light.


For example, one group came up with the idea to have the class make movie trailers using iMovie on the iPad. The catch was that groups would choose their theme, characters, and conflict at random from pre-printed slips of paper. In their written instructions, the student facilitators required thumbnail sketches of the movie trailer scenes before they gave out iPads. They also sat with each group to review the thumbnails, offering suggestions for improvement. We invited another class to sit with us for a viewing of the movie trailers. This design challenge was so well-planned and so fun that we have brought it out again for subsequent classes. We always make sure that the class knows that the activity was designed by former students.

Design Challenge III


Group 8:

The Challenge: Your group has been charged with creating an advertising campaign to resurrect a failed or flawed product. Use what you have learned about truth in advertising to promote the product—in fact, convince the audience to see any “flaws” in a favorable way.

The Product: Nintendo Virtual Boy



What went wrong? The Nintendo Virtual Boy has the distinction of being the only Nintendo game console to fail. Introduced in 1995, the system was a portable visor that allowed gamers to play in 3D. There are several reasons for the demise of this product. At the time, the \$180 selling price was considered excessive for a portable game unit. There also were not enough game titles available to hold the interest of players. Perhaps most seriously, use of the visor caused eye strain and headaches—complaints of physical discomfort were so common that Nintendo issued a warning that people should take 15 minute breaks for every 30 minutes of game time.



VicCom Presentation:
Audience Checklist
Chenango CTE Center

Presenters: _____ Date: _____

Circle the Appropriate Number



Presentation was:	Poor			Excellent
1. Complete	1	2	3	4
2. Convincing	1	2	3	4
3. Creative	1	2	3	4
4. Enthusiastic	1	2	3	4
5. Professional	1	2	3	4
6. Welcoming—presenters made eye contact when they talked	1	2	3	4
7. A Team Effort—it was clear that all group members participated	1	2	3	4



TOTAL POINTS = 28 × % SCORE

TOTAL POINTS

GRADE

Comments: _____

Design challenge collage

Conclusion

Once students are invested in these projects, they are more willing to take risks in other projects. Being secure in their skills frees them up to challenge themselves in their work and not be

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Having positive school experiences is a powerful indicator of continued educational success.

afraid of being “wrong.” They are also more invested in the Visual Communications program itself.

This year’s juniors were eager to meet with visiting sophomores and show off what they had learned. They wanted to post their movies on Facebook for a wider audience. They see themselves as guiding the Visual Communications curriculum and program into the following years. Returning students often talk about the design challenges they created and ask if we are still using them. In every one of these scenarios, we have seen that students associate positive feelings with the activities in this class. Having positive school experiences is a powerful indicator of continued educational success (Plank, Deluca, & Estacion, 2005).

There’s a noticeable change in the program when students are the ones “calling the shots.” Students are engaged in their learning because they have ownership, and with ownership comes accountability. The nature of the CTE curriculum may lend itself to this student-teacher collaboration, but we invite teachers in all disciplines to find a way to incorporate student interests and feedback into instruction. The benefits begin with greater student engagement in the classroom and extend outward, influencing a student’s continued success in other areas of their lives.

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