Learning in Motion: Exploring Animation

By Lena Deskins, MS, NBCT

Imagine the excitement and pride your students will feel as they produce and present their very own animated educational feature! It may seem a bit intimidating, especially if you consider yourself to be technologically challenged, but your students will enjoy this engaging and different method to express their ideas and demonstrate learning. In addition to expressing what they've learned through a different medium, both you and your students will have the opportunity to hone valuable problem solving skills.

Responding to the Naysayers

I imagine many of you reading this are contemplating a whole host of reasons why you think you CAN'T use animation in your classroom. Some of you may be thinking, "I don't have the money for this!" Well, don't let this deter you from trying this idea! All you need to get started is a Webcam and some simple software that you may already have available. For those who feel like you don't know enough about animation to teach your students, know that when you present the idea of exploring animation to your students, they will more than likely run with it! Afterall, they've grown up surrounded by technology, and they are often fearless when it comes to experimenting with new software and electronic equipment! While, your students may not be able to initially create "production quality" work, they will be able to develop a product in which they can take pride and pick up many 21st century skills along the way.   So, why not give it a try!

Why Animation?

Some reasons to try animation in your classroom include:

- getting your students engaged and super excited about learning,
- allowing students to explore a different method for demonstrating what they've learned,
- providing an authentic way for students to practice problem-solving strategies,
- affording students the opportunity to collaborate and work as a team, and
- It's just plain fun!

Getting Started

Some of the necessary software and equipment may already be available to you through your school. Following are a few essentials that are needed to get you started.

- A computer (PC or Mac, preferably with DVD burner).
- A camera that can be connected directly to a computer. Two types that work best are a Webcam with a USB cable and/or a mini DV camcorder with a IEEE-1394 (Firewire) cable.
- Support equipment such as a tripod, lights, means of supporting background (i.e., easel).
- Animation capture software, which captures images one frame at a time and then strings them together into a movie. Available software that can be used for this purpose include:

    - Frames 4 (PC, Mac, Linux) - www.tech4learning.com/frames
    - I Can Animate (PC, Mac) - www.kudlian.net/products/icananimate
    - Stop Motion Pro (PC) - www.stopmotionpro.com
    - i-StopMotion (Mac) - www.boinx.com/istopmotion

- Editing software is also helpful (i.e., MovieMaker (PC) or iMovie (Mac).

A Webcam can be purchased for about $30 depending on the quality. I decided to start out with something inexpensive. As our knowledge and zest for these projects grow, I see the potential for upgrading some of the equipment, but my initial purchase got us started. There are also complete kits that can be purchased for animation, and one designed with the classroom in mind is from ReadyANIMATOR (www.readyanimator.com).

Once you have the necessary equipment, you may ask yourself, "Where do I begin?" In my classroom, I always start with the most important step in any technological project— the planning! I have my students create a storyboard that includes sketches of how they envision the animation to look, and the words that will accompany the images. While animation is streaming many frames or pictures together, I do not require that students detail every frame. The big goal in storyboarding is present the general idea of the animation.

Animation can be done in four basic forms: white board, stick figure, clay, and paper. For my classroom, paper seemed like the easiest and least expensive place to start, and the possibilities are endless. Students simply create the artwork needed for the animation. This could be the background and moveable characters. My students used construction paper for the characters, along with brads to facilitate movement.

Students then begin capturing the images, or frames, that will be used for streaming together the final product. These images are then loaded into the animation software application on the computer. The procedure for uploading the images will vary depending on the type of software used. Text and sounds can also be added as desired.

So, you think you are up to the task? Are you ready to have your students' develop their own animated productions? If so, pop the popcorn, and let the premieres begin!

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