



What to Look for in a Digital Video Camera for School

John Sutton, February 2005

More and more schools are investing in a digital video camera (dv camera); the arrival of these little cuties into the mass consumer electronics market means that everybody from Curry's to John Lewis is selling them and with starting prices of under £300, it's no wonder that they are so popular with schools.

There are so many different brands and features available, that it can become quite confusing when trying to make a choice for school. However, if we begin from the premise that we are likely to want children of primary age to use the equipment, then we can start to narrow our choices down.

The first thing to consider is what do you want to do with any video that you shoot? For most schools, it will be a case of publishing a video on the school website, or possibly burning it to CD. If this is the case for you, then the chances are you will be using either Windows Media Player or Quicktime to play the video back. You don't need semi-professional equipment to achieve an acceptable standard of quality if you are using these formats, in fact, practically every camera on the market will provide a decent picture for either of these players. If, on the other hand, you want to produce DVD quality playback on a full screen TV, then you will probably be disappointed with the results from the cheaper end of the market.



The Canon MV700i is a popular choice with schools at around £300

Expensive features that you don't need

Don't bother with high levels of zoom - the quality of image obtained when using the full zoom capacity of most cameras leaves a lot to be desired - and most children can't keep the camera steady enough when using a zoom, even with the anti-shake software that most cameras have. Similarly, some more expensive cameras offer fancy low-lighting features and manual focus features, which, while useful for the dedicated amateur movie maker, inevitably add to the complexity of operation.

Some cameras allow you to plug them into a pc and record and stream directly in the way that a webcam works. Again this extra feature comes at a price, and because the cost of a dedicated webcam that can sit on top of your monitor is now so low, that this is probably a feature that you can live without.

Features that are worth considering

The first feature that I look for in any DV camera for school use is whether it has a microphone plug to allow an external mike to be plugged in. The condenser microphones on DV cameras are incredibly sensitive, and it can be very frustrating when you review the tape of your excellent drama lesson only to realise that you can't hear the children acting over the mutter of the rest of the class, who you thought were sitting like angels! While you might not use an external mike for your first few projects, it is an accessory that anyone with any ambition will want to add.

Another feature that you may consider worthwhile is the ability to take still pictures. This allows the camera to double up as a digital stills camera. There are two ways that this is achieved: one is to write the picture to the tape, the other is to have a separate memory card (of just the same type that you get with a standard digital camera), the other is to write the image to tape. The former method is easier and more flexible, but is generally found on more expensive cameras.

Must haves

Having established that the features of most basic dv cameras will suffice for school use, there are some add-ons that I would consider vital for any school wanting to shoot digital video:

- **A decent waterproof camera bag**

- **An extended warranty** - most manufacturers have a standard charge in excess of £100 to repair a camera, whatever the problem

- **A tripod** - an absolutely essential accessory, and don't buy the cheapest, they are just not worth it.

- **A spare battery** - most cameras come supplied with a battery that won't manage an hour of use by children zooming in, zooming out, switching on and off, rewinding, re-shooting etc.

Connecting to the pc

There are two basic methods of connecting a dv camera to the pc. The first is to use the "dv out" socket that is standard on most cameras. This is more commonly known as "Firewire", and it offers a high-speed rate of transfer between camera and pc. However, some cameras are now coming with a USB connection supplied instead. Firewire is a much faster method than standard USB, however, if your pc supports the newer USB2 standard, you may find that this is even faster than Firewire. Since USB ports are now the norm on PCs, it may make more sense to use a camera with a USB connection. With Firewire, you will probably find you are restricted to one or two laptops around school.

Panasonic



At under £600, the Panasonic has a spec that is typical of a mid-range dv camera

Conclusion

Most cameras on the market will provide a reasonable quality of image for publishing on CD or the web, you don't need to consider a high-spec camera unless you want to produce DVD quality output. It's more important to budget for some of the extras listed above than spend your money on expensive features. The only feature that really is worth considering, and it's hard to find on cameras below £500 is the ability to plug in an external mike.

Whatever you decide, buying a DV camera for your school can open up a whole new digital and creative curriculum for your children.

Weblinks

There is a vast array of outlets on the net and high street that sell digital video cameras and it simply isn't possible to provide a comprehensive list of sites here. I am restricting this list to companies that I have bought either cameras or equipment off in the past. I am not endorsing them in any way other than to say I received acceptable service and after-sales care.

<http://www.internetcamcordersdirect.co.uk/> Online camera shop

<http://www.jessops.co.uk/shop.cfm> The website of the highstreet camera specialists

<http://www.pcwb.com/> PC World Business



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