



Short-form Documentary: A Scaffolding Approach Using Challenges

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Abstract:

As an important component of communal world thought, documentaries give voice to storytelling with a purpose. Documentaries are powerful tools that bring important stories to light and, in turn, create a space for dialogue to exist about issues concerning the world.

Based on the technologies of Thomas Edison and The Lumiere Brothers, documentary films became a source of critical social expression (Cardillo, 2015). Documentary films have shared the world's cultures, societies, and conditions. There are many styles for teaching documentary filmmaking but there are definite components that can be taught to guide students to a good short-form documentary. This article considers five components within seven scaffolded challenges to teach short-form documentary production.

Introduction:

Today, everyone has a video camera in their pocket. The tools of production that are necessary for short-form filmmaking are available to all and the internet is available as a distribution channel. Regardless of what kind of camera is being used to film the project, there are parts that can be filmed with any kind of camera, even a mobile device, to make the project well rounded.

It imperative that we give students a set of guidelines to follow in order to create stories that will resonate. Today every business, including corporations, news organizations, non-profits and others are looking for short-form video to sell, help causes and inform the viewing public. Short-form narratives are

becoming increasingly popular and important in our everyday communication (Michael, 2013).

As good storytelling is essential to the documentary, this article looks more at the mechanics of teaching and putting together the working parts of the documentary through a scaffolding approach.

These parts include: montage, archival footage, interviews, b-roll, and sound. Of course, a good script outline is important as a blueprint. But this article will follow through the parts that make up a good short-form documentary.

This article is based on a course entitled Field Production, where the final project was a culmination of seven challenges. In this case challenges are defined as individual class exercises and assignments. Most

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challenges were performed with a group, but the final edit was individual, culminating in a 5 to 7-minute micro-documentary. The group work included outline, script, and filming: b-roll, montage, and interviews. Then each student took the footage and created their own 5 to 7-minute short-form documentary as their final submission in the course.

Literature Review:

Documentary often means a film that has certain elements: a narration or “voice-of-god”, a story with talking head “experts”, stock images/footage from an archive and some educational element that takes the story forward (Aufderheide, 2007). In structuring exercises for a short-form documentary project this article looks at five parts: montage, archives, interviews, b-roll and sound.

Montage, in short-form documentary allows for a large amount of information to be seen by the audience in a short amount of time. A montage is a set of clips and/or stills that have been edited together into a sequence. Sound for a montage can either be music or a voiceover to carry the story forward. Audiences understand and love montages as it brings energy and excitement to a project (Perelman, 2021).

The use of archival footage can elevate your documentary film. Sourcing archival film, photos, letters, newsreels, newspapers, and other sources of archive material can help your viewers connect with the topic and adds integrity to your documentary filmmaking. These visuals help the audience fully realize events that they did not personally witness. Exploring digital film libraries and image archives is a great way to supplement your historical documentary and add context to your movie’s talking heads. (Burns, 2020)

The interview process is a mandatory part of documentary filmmaking. There are several ways of using interviews in a project. First, they can be intertwined with a voiceover narrative to add expertise to the story or the interviewees can be pieced together to tell the story themselves. The voices of the those interviewed adds a contemporary, personal resonance to the historical, compilation footage without challenging the assumptions of that footage explicitly, as a voice-over commentary might do (Nichols, 1983).

A common editing technique used to make a video story more engaging is to add visual interest and context by cutting away from the main video (dubbed

A-roll) to secondary video footage (dubbed B-roll) (Bernd, et al., 2019). B-roll keeps the story interesting to the viewer.

Music can be a tricky element in documentary film. It is feared that music may contradict the apparent spontaneity and naturalism of the documentary aesthetic (Rogers, 2015). But Rogers also says that the emotion, historical referents and rhythmic persuasion of music make the use of creative sound an extraordinarily compelling device for many nonfiction filmmakers.

Some indication of how the use of music is viewed from within the perspectives of documentary production can be gleaned from the latest edition of Michael Rabiger’s *Directing the Documentary* (Rabiger, 1998):

- Music should not inject false emotion.
- Choice of music should give access to the inner life of a character or the subject.
- Music can signal the emotional level at which the audience should investigate what is being shown (Rabiger 1998, p. 310)

Methodology

First, we will look at the *Experiential Learning Theory*. When a student is experiencing the moment or, “real life learning”, understanding is maximized because it is active, engaged, and collaborative. Actual experiences allow students opportunities to connect theory and practice. These real-life experiences allow students to learn in unfamiliar situations, to understand others who are unlike themselves, and to practice using this knowledge to create and develop valuable skills (Ash and Clayton, 2009).

As experiential learning is learning through experiences, Project-Based Learning is the approach in which students acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. Students drive their own learning through thought provoking inquiry and decision making. With project-based learning students work collaboratively to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge (Bell, 2010).

The Course

The course that this scaffolding approach used was entitled, Field Production. This was a 300-level course, one semester (15 weeks) long and had 20 students in the class.

Students completed a short-form documentary of 5-7 minutes in length. The course was set up as

a scaffolding of challenges, culminating in one final, individual project.

Students worked in groups for most of the challenges, as they would in the real world. They then take the footage that was produced in these groups to create their own unique version of the project.

Challenge 1- Individual Montage

The course begins with asking each student to create a 1–2-minute montage of their favorite places on college campus. They were asked to use their mobile device to create clips and then editing in Adobe Premiere. This is done for several reasons. First, to teach the student how to use a series of shots set to music, or as b-roll under dialogue, to tell a story. Montage helps to advance the story quickly so it is of great help in a short-form documentary. Next, this process allows the instructor to have a baseline knowledge of the students' editing skills and what needs improvement.

Next, groups of 3 are formed and students are asked to choose a topic from a list provided:

1. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
2. Health and Wellness initiatives
3. Environmental Sustainability initiatives
4. Veganism initiatives
5. LGBTQ issues
6. Importance of Culture on Campus
7. Social Justice Causes
8. Feminism
9. Depression issues among our students
10. What my University of Hartford education means to me

Students then meet in their teams to develop a working script outline. This outline should include a story outline, who they will interview and questions for the interviewees that help flush out the story. As Burns (2020) says, An outline keeps you focused and organized and helps you foresee problems before they come up in the process. They will also be asked to use archival footage to give the story a history.

Challenge 2 - Finding Archival Stills and Footage

Working with a school archivist is a powerful form of research for students. The subject areas were chosen specifically because the archivist made it known that there were photos and some video footage available for each of these subjects. The students work as a team with the archivist to find related images and video on their subject area.

Challenge 3 - Interviews

Using interviews and interviewees to tell the story of a documentary can be a bit more difficult than having a voiceover but it gives the story more life. The voices of the those interviewed adds a contemporary, personal resonance to the historical, compilation footage without challenging the assumptions of that footage explicitly, as a voice-over commentary might do (Nichols,1983).

Having the team work on the interview questions with this method of storytelling in mind is a great way to accomplish this style. The individual editors can choose whether a voiceover will be necessary to get the story told.

Challenge 4 - B-roll

Groups create brainstorming sessions based on the interview questions to come up with b-roll ideas. After interviewing their sources, they film the b-roll that best fits the answers to the questions asked.

Challenge 5 - Group Montage

Montage is imperative in short-form documentary as it allows for a large amount of information to be seen by the audience in a short amount of time. A montage is a set of clips and/or stills that have been edited together into a sequence. Sound for a montage can either be music or a voiceover to carry the story forward. Audiences understand and love montages as it brings energy and excitement to a project (Perelman, 2021).

The montage can be used to fill in any blanks that occur after the interviews and b-roll is complete. Montages can also be completed with archival footage and images.

Challenge 6 - Sound/Music Collections

Music is an individual choice during the editing process of the projects. The use of music can be complicated in documentary, but it can also help to guide the story and should especially be used during montage sequences. Music must be copy-right free for all projects. A list of copyright free music sights are shared with students.

Challenge 7 - Final Edit

Once the first 6 challenges are complete and students share all the materials that they have worked on as a team to each other's external drives. Now the individual editing process begins. Class and lab times are

used to guide students through the editing process, using Adobe Premiere software. To keep this process streamlined a few guidelines are put in place.

1. Each project must have all 5 challenges built in
2. Each project must have a title, lower thirds for interviews and credits
3. A rough cut will be due 2 weeks prior to final projects. Notes will be given at that time.

Analysis:

After teaching this course twice in the past year there were some good take-aways. First, the individual montage is especially helpful in finding the students that would need more editing practice on the front end of the course so that they could complete the final project with the best result. It also gave the students an opportunity to see how using montages could tell a story which would help them develop their final project montage. As Perelman (2021) stated, montages bring energy and excitement to a project.

The interview and b-roll process was very similar to my other courses, such as Historical Documentary and Sports Documentary, and students were fairly used to this process by now. These two challenges build on teamwork and give them a real-world experience. As mentioned in the methodology, Project-Based Learning helps students acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems.

When it came to sound, I stressed the technique of allowing the interviewees to tell the story and only use a voiceover as a last resort. The voices of the those interviewed adds a contemporary, personal resonance to the historical, compilation footage without challenging the assumptions of that footage explicitly, as a voice-over commentary might do (Nichols, 1983).

Those who did the strong scripting outline at the beginning of the process had a much easier time of this.

Having a rough cut also proved very beneficial to both the students and myself. I was able to see their progress and help them to achieve their goals after seeing where they were at the time.

Students working collaboratively to research and create projects, along with scaffolding of challenges allowed students to develop both teamwork and technical skills. Experiential Learning, maximizes the learning because it is active, engaged, and collaborative. Actual experiences allow students opportunities to connect theory and practice.

Future Work/Conclusion

This course and the challenges within it were a good way to help beginner documentary film students to find a set of steps to help guide them to the finished product. I believe that this process can work well for an introductory documentary production course. As students become comfortable with these processes, they can venture out to more broad filming styles and techniques. As Bill Nichols said,

Documentary as a concept or practice occupies no fixed territory, It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques, addresses no set number of issues, and adopts no completely known taxonomy of forms, styles, or modes.

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