

Video Curriculum: Documentary Production and Analysis

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Subject: Community and Home

This curriculum seeks to incorporate the techniques of video production with an understanding of how these techniques shape our interpretations of film. I have chosen documentary films from a variety of different countries spanning from the 20s to the 90s. These documentaries are stylistically and thematically very diverse — but they share a common thread; they all focus on communities. I have chosen to focus on community because I believe that this is an especially relevant topic for adolescents who are emerging as members of many new communities including their peer group, work community, ethnic groups, neighborhoods, and political organizations. I am interested in encouraging thoughtful discussion about the communities of which they are a part — particularly focusing on peer groups, school sub communities (musical groups/sports/etc.). I would like to introduce my students to a “behind the scenes” model of film interpretation. These lessons will help them become aware of the strategies and technical devices that are commonly employed in film-making and to recognize how different shots, camera motions, editing, and compositional choices shape and guide a viewer’s understanding of a story. I have also chosen documentary because it seems to be a particularly studio-based genre. In studio art, the materials exist outside of the artist who shapes them to express a particular idea. Similarly, the documentary draws on real world material, but invents its format and presentation.

Students will also experience the detailed preparation involved in planning and filming a movie. Student production groups will be responsible for writing treatments, making storyboards and working as a production team to film and edit their footage. Analysis of exemplars is an important part of learning about any art form. While I would like to expose my students to documentary films in their entirety, art classes have the particular disadvantage of lasting only a semester and this limits the degree to which we will be able to explore films in depth. This may open a door for potential collaboration with an English or Social Studies teacher. As an interdisciplinary collaboration the students would be able to develop a much more well-rounded understanding of the scope of possibilities available to the documentary film artist. In the absence of this possibility I would like to show my class sequences from films that illustrate important concepts linking production methods to the expressive potential of film.

I have broken my documentary exemplars in to three categories: advocate, observer, and poet. The films in these groups share philosophical ideas about what a documentary should be and how it should be composed. We will explore these sub-genre and identify the techniques that reinforce the expressive nature, persuasive strategies, and impacts that they have on their audience. Students will then use these strategies to make conscious choices about their own films.

Lesson 1: Introduction to Video/ Shot Types and Techniques

Learner Objectives

1. Students will become acquainted with a VHS video camera understand basic functions (power, record, video tape, zoom, lens cap, focus, white balance, tripod) and demonstrate their knowledge by identifying specific parts and their function.
Grad Standard 1.3b: performing or presenting in an artform by demonstrating fundamental skills.

2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of camera safety precautions by modeling proper handling and camera operation.

Grad Standard 1.3b: performing or presenting in an artform by demonstrating fundamental skills.

3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the film composition and framing vocabulary : close up, long shot, medium shot, pan, tilt, tracking, low angle, high angle, staging, camera heighth, and zoom by filming examples of each.

Grad Standard 1.3a: using the principals and elements of the art form.

4. Students will become aware of different professional roles in film making (director, camera person, production assistant, recorder) and take turns fulfilling these roles in small groups

Grad Standard 1.2: knowing the basic conventions of the creative decision-making process

Teaching Objectives

1. The teacher will show students a short film with several examples of camera shots, angles, and camera movements along with written worksheets to reinforce student understanding of important vocabulary.
2. The teacher will demonstrate proper handling of video equipment and set guidelines for acceptable use. If a student does not handle the video camera safely they will not be allowed to act as camera person for the remainder of the period.
3. The teacher will model appropriate group role playing (camera person, director recorder, and production assistant) and define these individual's function in the group. Roles will be alternated every three shots.

Concepts for Mastery

1. Films are created by a production team. Members of the production team have specific roles
2. Film production requires special safety precautions
3. Videographers use a variety of camera shots, angles, and camera movements to tell a story.
4. Film has its own special vocabulary that describes the type of picture that is recorded. Studio:
Students will practice using different shooting techniques by capturing video examples of specific types of shots from a shot list.

Resources

Three VHS video cameras batteries or extension chords

A television with VCR

three VHS tapes

Teacher-made shot vocabulary tape

shot-capture worksheets

Pre-Lesson Prep

- Copy definition worksheet
- Copy production roles worksheet
- Bring name tags for roles
- Produce video example
- Make sure video batteries are charged and equipment is available
- Cue up video
- Make copies of group assessment

Lesson Motivation

The instructor will begin lesson with a short clip from the documentary “Decline of Western Civilization III” by Penelope Spheeris -this clip will highlight some of the film techniques the class will talk about during the lesson. After watching the clip ask students what specific things they noticed. This short discussion will serve as a pre assessment. The same clip will be reviewed at the end of class after film vocabulary has been reinforced- students should be more aware of specific film techniques and be able to point out examples that they were not previously able to.

Lesson Sequence

1. Introduction: short video clip, students will be asked to record their observations.
2. Describe general properties of film as a series of moving pictures.
3. Demonstrate VHS camera functions. discuss safety precautions
4. Allow students to practice handling the cameras
5. Hand out Camera angle/shot/ movement worksheet.
6. Review worksheet as guided by videotape
7. Discuss Video Production Roles/ pass out worksheet/ assign roles
8. Divide into groups of 4-5 pass out shot capture sheets
9. Students will work together to capture desired footage
10. If students finish early they may view student video examples on the web : www.apple.com/education/dv/showcase/index.html
11. Pass out group assessment sheets- collect.
12. Collect VHS cameras, tapes
13. Post assessment: Watch clip from *Decline of Western Civilization III*, and ask students to record their observations using their new vocabulary.
14. Misc. Clean up

Vocabulary

Long Shot: A shot taken from far away

Mid Shot: A medium shot, usually includes the subject from waist up

Close Up: A shot taken close to the subject, often used to show emotion.

High Angle: The camera is placed high, looking down at the subject. This angle often makes the subject appear smaller than it is- this may be interpreted by the audience as a sign of powerlessness.

Low Angle: The camera is placed low, looking up at the subject. This angle often makes the subject look bigger than it is- this may be interpreted by the audience as a sign of power.

Pan: The Camera moves from left to right, or right to left

Tilt: The camera moves up or down. Often used in film to slowly reveal a character, or to emphasize vertical distance

Zoom In: Camera moves from a longer shot to a close up. This technique draws attention to the subject

Zoom Out: Camera moves from a close shot to a more distant shot. This technique draws our attention to the setting

Grading Criteria

1. Group Members Assessment: survey to be handed out to each group member to assess themselves and group members:

Did this person - work as a team? Handle Video Equipment carefully? Treat Group Members Respectfully? 50% of daily grade This score will be modified by teacher's observations, particularly regarding video equipment handling- any deliberate misuses of equipment = immediate C.

2. Group videos will be assessed for accuracy- and given a score based on whether the shots met the descriptions on the worksheet. 90% and above= A, 80= B, 70=C. . . 50% of daily grade

Lesson 2 Pre-Production Sequencing: Group Video Portraits

Learner Objectives

1. Students will learn about the pre-production process of writing a treatment and create their own treatment outlining their group's documentary portraits.
Grad Standard 1.3b performing and presenting in an art form using fundamental skills
2. Students will collect a variety of footage- including interviews and cover shots to use in the editing process
Grad Standard 1.3b performing and presenting in an art form using fundamental skills

3. Students will be introduced to editing as a conceptual element- and make decisions when planning the shooting of their portraits that will affect the construction of their final edited sequences

Grad Standard 1.3c generating and communicating artistic intent and creating original works

Teacher Objectives

1. The instructor will introduce different editing techniques (Jump Cuts, Match Cuts, Cross Cuts, Montage) as they appear in sample documentaries and guide students in interpreting their unique impact on the viewer.
2. The instructor will introduce the process of writing a treatment and model the process for her students.- specifically highlighting the use of cover shots to enhance a sequence.

Concepts for Understanding

1. Videos are carefully and deliberately constructed in the pre production process. Writing a treatment is a common technique used to describe an idea and to divide it up into sequences and scenes.
2. Documentary film makers use cover shots to enrich interview segments and add layers of meaning to their story.
3. Editing is the process by which film clips are arranged to produce a sequence. The way a sequence is arranged affects the audiences interpretation.
4. Video editors have a specific vocabulary that they use to describe different film cuts and transitions.

Lesson Motivator

This lesson is a great way for students to get to know each other at the beginning of the year- and it gives students experience with interviewing and conceptualizing their films that will help them in the creation of their final group documentary.

Lesson Sequence

1. Students will be introduced to the project
2. Students will view short sequences from three documentary interviews that makes use of cover shots, jump cuts, match cuts, cross cuts, and montage sequences. This vocabulary will be reinforced with intertitles introducing vocabulary- and providing a sample of each technique.
3. Video production groups will be assigned production roles- these roles will rotate for each interview segment.
4. Students will choose an interview question, practice the interviews and brainstorm cover footage that might relate to the interview questions/ answers. This material will be used to write a treatment.

5. The instructor will demonstrate the process of writing a film treatment- using an overhead projector and pass out project worksheets and treatment guides to production groups.
6. Students will write treatments for their group's video portrait and begin filming.
7. The instructor will circulate throughout the groups and review student work
8. When students have completed their shoots- they will have an opportunity to review their shots and choose their best sequences to be digitized. The resulting footage should include a segment from each of the members of their group and between 3-5 cover shots.
9. This lesson will continue with directed editing instruction in the next lesson.

Assessment

Video portraits must contain:

1. At least 5 different cover shots
2. An interview segment from each of the group members
3. Three different kinds of camera shots (close up/ mid shot/ etc.)
4. The completion of a pre-production treatment

lessons to follow: writing a treatment shooting footage photoboard

Documentary: Video Portrait Student Handout

For this project, your group will make a short documentary about the people in your group. You will each take turns being interviewed, asking questions, being the camera person and the production assistant. The interviewer will pick 4 questions from the list on this sheet and practice with their subject before filming. The total interview should last no longer than 2 minutes.

Hints

Camera Person: Pause between each questions to get a different angle or shot type. Keep the camera very steady- or use a tripod. Gather a variety of extra cover shots- relating to what the person is discussing. For example: If the interviewee is talking about the school lunch room- gather footage of that person eating lunch, a long shot of the cafeteria- a close up of a lunch tray etc. . . If they are talking about their family- take still shots of family photographs, childhood toys, etc. . .

Interviewer: Be friendly, ask easy questions at first to let your subject get warmed up. Speak slowly and clearly. If your interviewee gives a short answer to one of your questions encourage them to say more. If the production assistant gives you a cue that time is almost up, wrap up the interview and thank your subject.

Introduce your speaker: “This is Joanna Reeves, she is an art teacher at Sanford High School.”
Wrap up at the end of your interview: “Thank you so much, Joanna, for joining us today and answering our questions.”

Interviewee: Relax and imagine you are talking to a good friend- somewhere without a camera. Speak loud enough so the camera can hear you. Ask the interviewer for the questions ahead of time so you can think about what you want to say.

Production Assistant: Make sure the interview does not go on for more than 2 minutes- if it begins to get too long give the interviewer a hand cue that their time is almost up. Pay attention to potential problems- outside noise level, bad lighting, interruptions.

Questions (choose 4):

1. What is something you really wish you had and why?
2. What are your dreams for the future?
3. What is your favorite place in this school, and why?
4. What is your favorite food, and why?
5. What is one thing you do really well in school?
6. What are some common problems junior high schoolers face?
7. Tell us a story about a time when you helped someone.
8. What is one thing you would do to make this school better?

9. How does your locker express your personality?

10. Can you tell me a little about your family?

11. What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Video Portrait: Treatment

Group Members:

Introduction: shots that pull the interviews together

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Interview 1 _____

QUESTION: _____

Anticipated Answer

Possible Cover Shots:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Transition Shot:

Interview 2 _____

QUESTION: _____

Anticipated Answer

Possible Cover Shots:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Transition Shot:

Interview 3 _____

QUESTION: _____

Anticipated Answer

Possible Cover Shots: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Transition Shot:

Interview 4 _____

QUESTION: _____

Anticipated Answer

Possible Cover Shots:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Transition Shot:

Interview 5 _____

QUESTION: _____

Anticipated Answer

Possible Cover Shots:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Transition Shot:

Conclusion: shots that pull the interviews together

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Lesson 3: Sub-Genre and Point of View in Documentary Film Making

Learner Objectives

1. Film production groups will choose a particular stance while developing their group's documentary; (advocate, observer, or poet) and choose shots and sequences that convey their position.
Grad Standard 1.3 performing or presenting in each art form using principles and elements of the art form
2. Students will be able to explain the differences between three different subgenres in documentary film and explain their conventions and techniques.
Grad Standard 2.4 :explaining the connection between the work of art and its social, cultural, or historical context
3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of pre-production planning by completing a photo-storyboard outlining their planned sequence of shots for their documentary on a school community.
Grad Standard 1.2 knowing basic conventions of the creative decision-making process
4. Students will improve their cooperative skills by working as members of a production team - offering their ideas, listening to others, and making decisions by consensus.

Teacher Objectives

1. The instructor will present three different historical roles that the documentary artist has filled and show students an example of each stance. (Advocate, Observer, Poet)
2. The instructor will discuss the priorities of these documentary film makers- and describe the camera and editing techniques used to support these positions.
3. The instructor will demonstrate the process of positing and developing a photo-storyboard from a treatment.

Concepts for Understanding

1. Film makers take different positions in relation to their subject matter, a film maker may be an advocate; interested in advancing a cause, an observer; interested in reflecting reality as accurately as possible, or a poet; interested in finding the beauty behind a story and enriching it with visual metaphors.
2. The way film makers make use of camera shots, angles, cuts, editing, audio, and special effects influences the viewers interpretation of an event or story to present a particular point of view.
3. Films are carefully and deliberately constructed in the pre-production period
4. Film makers work cooperatively with members of their production team to develop and implement their ideas.

Lecture: Documentary Styles and Point of View

Students will view sequences from three different styles of documentary that focus their attention on a particular community. These three documentary stances will be discussed in relation to the others and analyzed for their content and technique.

Documentor as Advocate

The Advocate Perspective takes advantage of the sensual allure of film to sell a particular position. Films in this genre use editing to select specific parts of a story that best represent the film-makers or producers stance.

Triumph of the Will, 1934, Leni Reifenstahl, Germany. This film is a blatant example of government sponsored propaganda. The film portrays Hitler as a demi-god, admired by thousands and in control of massive military and political power. The film was thought to have been responsible for gathering thousands of supporters and intimidating global powers with its portrayal of Hitler as a savior of the German people.

Land Without Bread, 1932, Luis Bunuel, Spain. This film describes in sardonic detail the life of a small Spanish town nestled in the mountains- and the misfortunes the common villagers have faced due to modernization, disease, and poverty. This film has a relies on a disturbing them/us dichotomy blaming the villagers for their wretched situation.

The Filmore, 1990, Kevin Jamison, United States. This film is one in a documentary series about the history of San Francisco neighborhoods- Filmore began as a primarily Japanese neighborhood- after most of its residents were forced to move to internment camps during W.W.II- it became a prosperous African American neighborhood- A city planning community leveled the neighborhood again in the 70's forcing its residents out to build new high rise apartments that none of the former residents could afford.

stylistic/technical characteristics:

voice-over guided narration

outside looking in- Point of View

Bad guys/Good Guys

use of camera angles to guide viewer's perspective characterized by a dramatization of an event

Documentor as Observer

The Observer subgenre was developed in reaction to the advocate films. These film makers use minimal editing and long shots to try and present a series of events as they actually happened

Warrendale, 1967, Allen King, United States. This documentary was filmed at a home for disturbed children- and details the affects of the death of a much loved cook on the troubled young .

American Dream, 1972, Barbara Kopple, United States. This documentary tells the story of a small town workers union who strikes dramatic pay cuts at the Hormel meat packing plant. Seen through the eyes of its workers Kopple sharply describes the position of labor against the tyranny of money-making corporations.

Decline of Western Civilization II, 1999, Penelope Spheeris, United States. This is a great community film for teen audiences- it explores communities of teenage “gutter punks” in the early 90’s. Their story is one of homelessness- squatting- drugs and punk rock. It is a depressingly realistic look at a destructive and lonely community. Home Movie 2000, Chris Smith- United States This documentary focuses on five different families in America and the eccentric and personal ways they have created homes for themselves. Humorous and diverse, this film explores our strong ties to home- and the creative lengths to which we will go to make a place for ourselves.

stylistic/technical characteristics:

audio

primarily interview-based

steady camera shots

minimal editing/ camera manipulation

Match frame editing- to emphasize real time sequences interested in “Conveying their feel in terms of people” (Karel Reisz)

Documentor as Poet

In every artistic medium there is a group of artists who love the medium. In film these film makers are very interested in beauty, special effects, and the ambiance of their films. These films read as a short ode- and use a visually delightful language.

Rain (Regen), 1929, Joris Ivens, Netherlands. A lyrical view of Amsterdam through the lens of rain. This film describes a single rainstorm's affect on a city. Ivens uses an impressionistic/ painterly language to sketch a beautiful cityscape and reveal the lives of the people who live in it.

Hands and Threads (Ruke I Niti), 1964, Mica Milosevic, Yugoslavia. The film shows in fascinating detail the activity of a rug-weaving shop. The viewer is mesmerized by the rhythmic action of the shuttles and the quiet concentration of the young women at work. When this is synchronized with harp music- we get the impression that the weavers are producing celestial music.

Juan I Can't Remember, 1999, Juan Carlos Rulfo, Mexico. This film explores themes of old age and loss by focusing its attention on a small elderly community in rural Mexico. I particularly love this documentary for its stylistic qualities. The film maker combines time-lapsed scenes from nature with stories about the lives of his subjects to create a very powerful and evocative story about old age and death.

stylistic/technical characteristics:

interested in contemplating themes through the lens of beauty rhythmic

editing

carefully composed shots

montage editing

special effects / video overlay

music added as an emotional element

dissolves/smooth transitions

wonder in contemplating nature

Lesson Sequence

1. Students will be introduced to these three different documentary stances- and given a little introduction to each before viewing segments of the aforementioned films. Students will use a viewer guide to record their interpretations about the different technical characteristics of these films-drawing on their knowledge of camera shots/ angles/ and editing techniques.
2. Students will share their observations- and the teacher will add additional qualities that are overlooked to a list on the board.
3. After each subgenre has been analyzed- the instructor will lead students in a comparison between the three- and ask students questions about the film makers distinct priorities and interests.
4. The instructor will guide students into the studio part of the lesson by explaining that they are going to take a particular stance in their final documentaries.
5. The class will brainstorm ideas for community topics in or around the school.
6. Students will break up into production teams and begin writing a treatment of their teams chosen idea- this treatment should pay particular attention to the groups chosen stance (Advocate, Observer, Poet) when planning audio/ sequencing/ and camera style.
7. After completing a treatment production groups will meet with their instructor for an in progress critique. Students will modify their ideas via instructor and peer feedback.
8. The instructor will demonstrate the process of expanding a treatment , gathering photos and constructing a storyboard.
9. Students will expand their idea from a treatment to a photo-storyboard. Using a digital camera students will collect sample images representing shots in their film. These shots will be arranged and rearranged until a coherent sequence has been created- followed by an in progress critique with instructor.

Assessment

completion of a written treatment 20%
revision 5%
completion of a photo storyboard 50%
completion of the viewer's guide 10%
group assessment 5%
participation in classroom discussions 5%