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Creating Documentary Shorts in a Credit-bearing Information Literacy Course

Jennifer Sharkey

Circumstances of the Instruction

In many higher education circles, there is increasing discussion about technology and its integration into curricula. A course such as this provides librarians the opportunity to move beyond the typical information literacy course and incorporate a technology that challenges students to develop higher order thinking skills. Many information literacy credit courses currently available focus on retrieval of information, a general library research process, or specific resources relevant to a subject discipline.

In broad terms this course introduces students to core concepts such as the social constructs of information, how technology impacts the dissemination, creation, retrieval, and storage of information, utilization of technology for finding, managing, synthesizing, evaluating, and sharing information. The overall goal of the course is to help students develop strategies for finding information in any setting and establish skills which will benefit them personally and professionally.

The specifics of the course will vary according to the processes and procedures of individual institutions. However, it is recommended that this course be established at a minimum as 2-credit hour course with a meeting time of approximately 90-100 minutes a week. Additionally, the heavy technology focus of the course makes it difficult to scale to a large class setting. It is easiest to manage with 20 students enrolled. This type of class could be linked to typical core curriculum outcomes such as critical thinking, civic engagement, service learning, or technology fluency.

Objectives of the Instruction

At the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Conceptualize characteristics and social constructs of information in current society
- Differentiate between types of information
- Establish a message or argument about a current or hot topic
- Utilize a variety of search strategies to find a variety of sources related to the selected topic
- Critically analyze the credibility of a source and its relevance to the film project's message or argument
- Create a documentary-style short film using established filmmaking techniques and software

Components of the Instruction

Preparation

Key content to cover during the course includes: Characteristics and social constructs of information, Documentary film genre and filmmaking preproduction, production, and postproduction techniques, Information searching and integration strategies, Evaluation and critical analysis of information, and Ethical and legal use of information. One's own comfort and knowledge of documentary filmmaking, the amount of preparation for the course will vary. Acquiring and reading key texts related to the genre could take up to two weeks of preparation. For every lecture, in-class activity and homework assignment, one should plan about 1-2 hours of preparation. For experienced instructors of information literacy sessions and credit-bearing courses, less time will be needed for the information literacy elements. In addition to developing the syllabus, in-class activities, and homework assignments, the grading structure will need to be determined. A useful grading formula is: class participation and attendance (20%), weekly homework assignments (20%), group participation and peer review (20%), and final project (40%).

For this class to be successful there needs to be some level of support structure within the organization for the filmmaking process. Specifically, students should have access to digital camcorders, tripods, lavalier/wireless microphones, and film editing software. A film kit of a digital camcorder, tripod and microphone could be assembled for about \$300. Several companies such as RCA, Creative Vado, Flip, Sony, and Kodak, manufacture small or mini camcorders for less than \$200. For a class of 20 students, a minimum of three kits should be available; an ideal number of kits is four or five. Many institutions provide small grants to fund technological purchases for specialized classes such as these.

Presentation

The structure of the class is dependent on the number of credit hours. More credit hours will provide more flexibility in how extensively content is covered. Since Information Literacy is a key element of this course, the structure should include elements from the five ACRL information literacy standards. For this specific type of class, it is imperative that time devoted to documentary filmmaking is included in the class session content. While students may know how to use some type of video recording device and possibly have uploaded video footage to the web, one cannot assume students have used film editing software or comprehend the overall process of creating a film. Additionally, a documentary film incorporates elements that are specific to the genre. Unless students have had an introductory class to documentary films, most students aren't aware of the genre characteristics.

- 1st - 2nd week: Introduction to the class and final project, characteristics of information / cycle of information / social constructs of information, form groups
During this time period students should be introduced to the broad concepts of information, how it is produced and disseminated (information cycle), and the influence of information on society. This builds a foundation for the rest of the course.
- 3rd - 4th week: Introduction to the documentary film-making genre and filming techniques, topic exploration and selection; types of information sources
Most students are not familiar with filmmaking techniques or the specific elements of the

documentary film genre. Introduction to these concepts will help students with their development of the final project. Continuing with information literacy competencies, having student explore various types of information sources will help them fulfill any source requirements for the final project.

- 5th - 6th week: Information searching strategies, integrating supporting information sources, finalize film topic / theme
Learning information search strategies can be covered broadly or is great depth depending on the skill level of the students, the course level (e.g. 100 or 400), and if the class is associated with a specific discipline. Apart with interviews, students often struggle with how and why other sources can be integrated into a documentary film. This is the most obvious juncture where information literacy and documentary filmmaking connect.
- 7th - 8th week: Storyboard documentary film, plan the film schedule
A quality film is directly related to the planning that is done prior to filming. Establishing a storyboard and film schedule will help students conceptualize the amount of work that needs to be done and encourage each group member to take on specific roles and responsibilities.
- 9th - 10th week: Interviewing techniques, construct interview questions, practice with filming
The heart of most documentary films are interviews and commentary of real life individuals. Capturing relevant content takes planning of questions to ask but also understanding interviewing techniques that are appropriate for the context and situation.
- 11th - 12th week: Film editing techniques, Practice with editing footage, evaluation and critical analysis of information
How a film is edited is as important as the actual footage and supporting documents. Sequencing of film scenes is directly related to the message or argument of the topic. The process requires extensive evaluation and critical analysis of the information being included.
- 13th - 14th week: Ethical and legal use of information, develop peer review, post-production process
As will all project ethical and legal use of information is important. Since a documentary does not cite information in the same way as a typical research assignment, students need to learn how to give appropriate credit to information used in the film in addition to obtaining written permission of interviewees.
- 15th - 16th week: Viewing final projects, conduct peer reviews, grading of final projects

The specific requirements of the final project can be adjusted to meet institutional and programmatic learning outcomes. Additionally, they can be modified to meet the expectations and skill expertise of the student population. For students who maybe more savvy searchers or have experience with filmmaking, the final project should embrace that knowledge and be adjusted accordingly. Below is a general description and requirements of the overall assignment.

Working as a group, students will provide a critical analysis of a current or hot topic in the format of a documentary-style short film (7-15 minutes). A successful project will include common filming techniques and production processes found in documentary films, present a clear analysis or argument related to the current

or hot topic, and use multiple types of information sources to present the argument/analysis.

Additional assignment objects such as an annotated bibliography or a self-reflection piece can be incorporated as part of the final assignment. Depending on the student population certain types of information sources may need to be required or limited.

Evaluation

To ensure the students stay on track for the course and to successfully complete the final assignment, it is helpful to have smaller assignments throughout the course that build into the final project. However, as will most courses, the points associated with these assignments should not be part of the final project points. Each assignment should stand on its own merit and have grading criteria unique to that assignment. The overall weekly assignments should account for approximately twenty percent of the overall grade. Specific points allotted to each assignment will vary according to the amount of work needed to complete the assignment. Some key assignments for this class should be selecting a topic, developing search strategies, source analysis, creating a storyboard, writing interview questions, and developing a film schedule.

To make grading easier and fairer, using a grading rubric can facilitate that process. Typically using a four or five point scale ranging from poor to excellent allows for adequate review of the work. The key elements to include in the grading rubric include:

- Using quality and a variety of resources
- Appropriately citing or acknowledging sources used
- The documentary short is about a current or hot topic
- A clear analysis or argument about the selected topic is presented
- The documentary runs in the allotted time
- Filming techniques that contributes to the quality of the overall product
- Other assignment objects as included

Supplementary Materials

- Syllabus sample
- Homework assignment sample
- Grading rubric sample

Recommended Resources

Rosenthal, Alan. (2007, 4th ed.). *Writing, directing, and producing documentary films and videos*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Rabiger, Michael. (2009, 5th ed.). *Directing the documentary*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press.

Baker, Maxine. (2005). *Documentary in the digital age*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press.

DVDs: Full Frame Documentary Shorts (2003-2007); Academy Award Nominated Short Films

Independent Lens -- <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/>

POV (Documentaries with a point of view) -- <http://www.pbs.org/pov/>

The Documentary Site -- <http://www.documentarysite.com/>

Syllabus sample

Week	Topic
1	Introduction to the class and final project
2	characteristics & social constructs of information; Form groups for final project
3	documentary films and filming techniques
4	topic exploration and selection; types of information sources
5	Information searching strategies
6	integrating supporting information sources; finalize film topic / theme
7	Storyboarding
8	Plan the film schedule
9	Interviewing techniques; Constructing interview questions
10	Practice filming
11	Film editing techniques; Practice with editing footage
12	Evaluation and critical analysis of information
13	Ethical and legal use of information,
14	develop peer review; post-production process
15	Viewing of final Project
16	Grading Final Assignments

Final Project: Working as groups of 3 or 4, you will provide a critical analysis of a current or hot topic in the format of a documentary-style short film (7-15 minutes). A successful project will include common filming techniques and production processes found in documentary films, present a clear message or argument related to the current or hot topic, and use multiple types of information sources to present the argument/analysis.

Specifically, a grading rubric will be used to identify the following:

- Saved in a standard video file format of .mpeg, .wmv, or .mov and burned to a CD or uploaded to a designated video portal -- ppt and flash files will not be accepted
- Use of common documentary filming techniques and production processes that contribute to the quality of the overall product
- The film is 15 minutes long or shorter
- A clear analysis or argument is presented
- Use of multiple types of information sources to present the topic and carry the argument/analysis through to the end
- All sources, including video, audio, and still image files, are appropriately cited or acknowledged
- A word-processed source annotation describing how and where each source was used in the film
- A reflection piece about the project and your experiences with it -- note: each group member must create his or her own reflection piece.
- A signed waiver forms from all participants

Grading

It is your responsibility to monitor your progress in class and your overall points. If you have a question about your overall grade, an assignment, or points given on a particular assignment, you need to take the initiative to talk to the professor.

According to FERPA, grades cannot be communicated via email. You can provide explicit permission to have your grades submitted via email but by doing this you are waiving your FERPA rights.

All homework is due by the beginning of class on the day it is due unless otherwise specified.

Late homework will be accepted; however, points will be deducted each day it is late. The amount of points deducted each day an assignment is late equals 20% of that day's total possible score (e.g. 35 point assignment: 1 day late = 28 points possible; 2 days late = 22.4 points possible, and so forth). One day late is homework handed in after the class session it is due has ended, two days late is homework handed in the day after the class session it is due, and so forth.

Plagiarism and copyright infringement will not be tolerated and the professor holds the right to fail you for such conduct.

	Points
class participation & attendance	140
Weekly assignments & in-class activities	2600
peer review	20
final project	200
Total points	620
A = 581-620	
B = 541-580	
C = 501-540	
D = 461-500	
F = 460 or below	

Homework assignment sample

Frame / video				
transition				
audio/narration				
music				
title				
timing				
Frame / video				
transition				
audio/narration				
music				
title				
timing				
Frame / video				
transition				
audio/narration				
music				
title				
timing				

Grading rubric sample

Criteria	Potential	Actual	Comments
Use of multiple types of information sources to present the topic and carry the argument/analysis through to the end	40		
All sources, including video, audio, and still image files, are appropriately cited or acknowledged	20		
Documentary film is about a current or hot topic	20		
A clear analysis or argument is presented	30		
Use of common documentary filming techniques and production processes that contribute to the quality of the overall product	30		
Inclusion of the reflective piece	20		
A word-processed source annotation describing how and where each source was used in the film	20		
Saved in a standard video file format of .mpeg, .wmv, or .mov; Burned to a CD or uploaded to a designated video portal	10		
The film is 15 minutes long or shorter	10		
Total points (200)	200		
Handed in on time	Yes	No	