Reading What's Beyond the Textbooks:
Documentary Films as Student Projects in College Reading Courses

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Abstract

This paper discusses how useful documentaries are in teaching college reading courses. Now that the ESL classroom has become not only multicultural but also multidimensional, it is imperative for language teachers to utilize technology so as to allow learners to use the target language in spoken and written discourse, to develop critical thinking skills in unconventional situations and to become motivated to 'read beyond' the classroom for a better understanding of the world around them. They must be taught how to *read the lines* and *between the lines*, but they should also be trained to *read behind* and *beyond the lines.* One potent way to achieve such goals is for them be engaged in meaningful projects involving documentary films.

Introduction

Learning is not confined within the four walls of the classroom. In truth, countless unknowns are discovered beyond the classroom boundaries and school periphery. Books and teachers are not the only source of knowledge, and the world outside the classroom is a laboratory of life that offers much more than what schools can provide. Hence, students must be ushered and trained to unremittingly, inquisitively, and critically investigate. In addition, they must be propelled to search for truths, must be driven to connect what is deduced from books with reality, and must be urged to raise important and profound questions. It is very crucial that students are allowed to seek answers and solutions to problems. This incessant search eventually becomes a tangible indicator that they can learn by themselves with very minimal teacher intervention. While it is true that the exchange of meaningful ideas and a range of comprehensible input can be made available in the classrooms, it is still imperative for teachers to engage the learners in off-campus activities and fieldwork that necessitate independent use of critical and logical thinking and the demonstration of sharp study skills. Students' ability to develop and use these skills, if properly and continuously harnessed when

meaningful opportunities are provided, would indeed result in more effective, genuine learning.

It must be remembered, however, that learning tasks and student activities, whether individual or collaborative, must be made relevant to and appropriate for the needs, preferences, and capabilities of the students. College language learners, for example, must be instructed to complete curricular requirements, e.g. projects and assignments, that allow them to apply not only their linguistic skills but also other innate and unrefined thinking and reasoning abilities. Moreover, they must be prompted to further classroom-generated knowledge through investigative, creative, and technology-reliant output. Given that technology and learning seem inseparable and that modern-day students are usually more adept with its various forms, teaching materials, school projects, and course requirements that complement pedagogy must be carefully chosen, well thought-out, and highly student-focused.

For this reason, this writer, currently teaching English reading, which in his university is coded *Eng 2- Reading and Thinking Skills for Academic Study*, assigned his students to produce brief but creatively-fashioned and exploratory documentary films that delve into contentious national and global issues, including errors in books, book piracy, poor reading habits and performance, deteriorating quality of instruction, and other pressing issues elicited from the students themselves.

Documentaries were chosen as a course requirement and as a learning tool because they are a potent medium for enhancing higher order thinking skills such as

   (1) distinguishing between facts and opinions or personal feelings;
   (2) arriving at judgments and making inferences;
   (3) generating questions;
   (4) recognizing and constructing convincing arguments;
   (5) formulating and supporting opinions;
   (6) defining, analyzing, and devising solutions for problems and issues;
   (7) sorting, organizing and classifying information;
   (8) integrating information and discerning relationships between ideas;

(9) evaluating information;

(10) arriving at supportable and informed conclusions;

(11) applying understanding and knowledge to new and different situations;

(12) developing logical and reasonable interpretations;

(13) suspending beliefs and remaining open to new information (Costa & van Grootheest, 2009).

Documentaries are moving pictures that aim to document a certain truth or reality (Nichols, 1997). In teaching, the use of documentary draws philosophical and theoretical support from the (1) *constructivist view,* which purports that learners construct knowledge by connecting new and old information largely by themselves, and from (2) *inquiry-based learning,* which principally involves the learners and leads them to understand content, issues, and questions surrounding a curricular area or concept (Costa & van Grootheest, 2009). Lane (2007) argues that "inquiry-based learning provides a means to actively involve students in the learning process…to reflect on their own learning, gain a deeper understanding of the course concepts in an integrated fashion, and become better critical thinkers" (p.1). The writer strongly believes that documentaries also offer learners grand opportunities to apply research, communication, presentation skills and creativity, and to reinforce their learning in other parts of the English Language curriculum. As Miller (as cited in Winton, 2010) eloquently puts it:

> Documentary has a critical role to play in education. The rapid advances in media technology have forced educators...to rethink notions of literacy and adapt curricula accordingly. If students are watching, listening, and producing even more than they are reading, [teachers] must ensure they have critical frameworks for analysis. [Teachers] can use documentaries to raise questions around voice, truth, ethics, and a range of themes relevant to the shifting literacies of the 21st Century (para. 11).

To Raijmakers (2007), documentary films have "a strong connection to reality." This means that what is studied in the classroom is verified by what is observed outside its walls. Furthermore, documentaries open 'valuable windows' for the learners, helping them learn about various disciplines. Hence, they should be a part of the curriculum and be allowed to aid instruction (Tafani, 2009).

Now that the ESL classroom has become not only multicultural but also multidimensional, it has become imperative for language teachers to utilize technology and to thus encourage the learners to use the target language in spoken and written discourse, thereby demonstrating critical thinking skills in unconventional situations. It is also important to motivate learners to 'read beyond' the classroom for a better understanding of the world around them. On this note, the writer proposes the use of documentaries and outlines how they can be utilized more effectively for purposes of teaching contemporary and contentious issues. Assigning students to produce documentaries, the writer argues, is a potent means to encourage them to read beyond the textbook and to see more clearly the world outside.

Documentary Project Design and Description

The design of the student documentary film is divided into three major phases, namely pre-production, actual production, and post-production. These phases are schematically presented below. Preliminary instructions regarding grouping and roles are given, and review and synthesis of previous lessons are conducted prior to the start of the project. In the writer's case, the lessons include the following: nature of the reading process, developmental stages of reading skills acquisition, factors affecting reading, reading models, and pressing local/national reading problems. The documentary project, therefore, is an appropriate means for students to synthesize and integrate information, and deduce implications from the aforementioned lessons through an in-depth and investigative approach. It is also a meaningful route towards advocacy for reading and the plethora of issues that stem from it. The students are given a time frame of one month to finish the project. The presentation of the documentaries serves as the culmination of lessons covered during the first quarter of the second semester.

With regards to technology needed in filming documentaries, the students are simply asked to obtain their own camera, tripod, microphones and video editing equipment. Software programs such as Moviemaker and Adobe Premier are used for video editing. They are also asked to enlist the assistance of experienced documentary makers, editors and computer instructors in the department/university to help them with this process. The filming does not usually pose any technical problems since students nowadays are adept in using varied forms of technology.
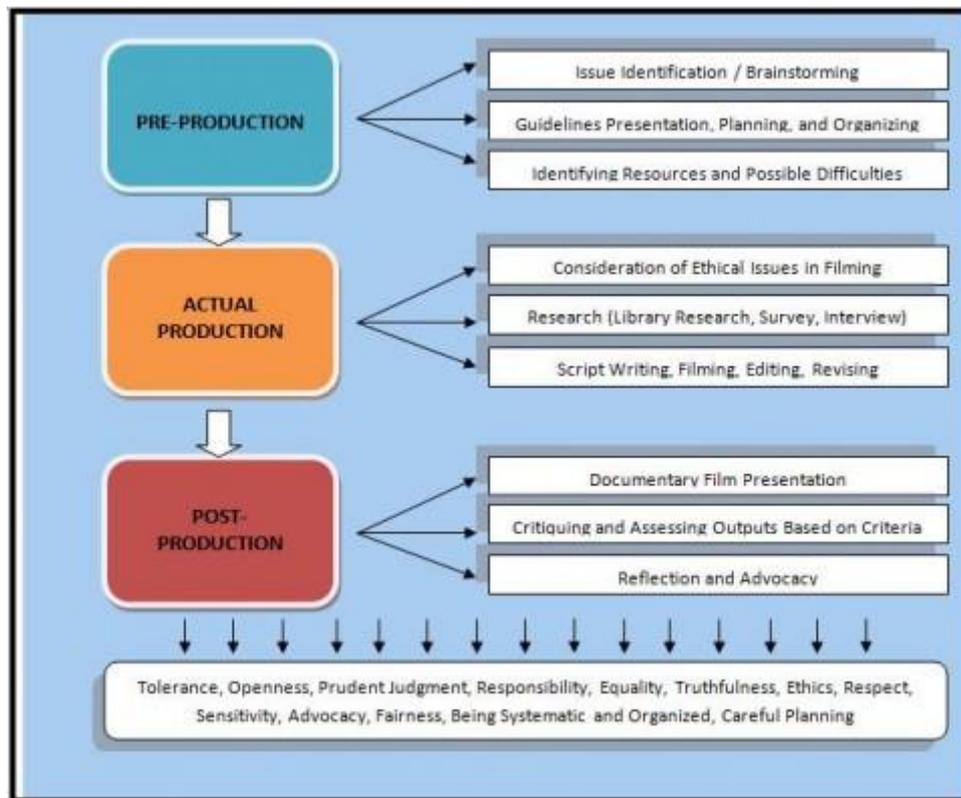
Figure 1. Documentary Project Design Phases

Figure 1 illustrates how student documentaries are produced. Each major phase is composed of several successive steps. The students are reminded to strictly follow these steps to arrive at well planned documentary projects. They are also made aware that any endeavor requires careful planning, organization, and patience. It must be emphasized, however, that central to the process is the identification of critical and contemporary reading issues. Further, they are told that they have both an avenue to opportunity and the responsibility to educate their community through the production of a valuable piece of work. To create a visual argument advocating for specific issues that are relevant to their generation is a brilliant way for them and their peers to positively contribute to their generation's present and future condition.

Figure 1 also shows that as students go through the developmental phases, values, dispositions, and worthwhile attitudes are developed among them. These are given a premium since the teaching-learning process should be made more meaningful through character formation. As they work collaboratively, students are expected to demonstrate openness, tolerance, critical judgment and other values that they can emulate from different personas they encounter in fiction and non-fiction stories, biographies and historical accounts, and the

realities mirrored in other text types/academic texts they read. This practice makes the teaching of values not superficial but with a depth that can replicate real-life situations.

Some Requisites

Gantt Chart. To keep track of the students' progress, they are asked to devise and to follow a Gantt chart of specific doable or manageable tasks that must be completed within a certain time frame. A sample template is provided below.

Objectives	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
1. Contentious reading issue/s has been identified	→			
2. Tasks have been divided/distributed.	→			
3. Resources have been identified.	→			
4. Ethical considerations have been identified.	→			
5. Subjects and informants have been identified.	→			
6. A formal plan has been mapped out.	→			
7. Research for pertinent information has commenced	→			
8. Filming has started.		→		
9. Further research has been conducted e.g. surveys, interviews.		→		
10. Video shots have been put together.			→	
11. Background sound, subtitles, and other effects have been incorporated.			→	
12. Video editing has been done.			→	
13. Consultation with teachers has been done.			→	
14. Final editing has been completed.				→
15. Credits have been finalized.				→
16. Documentary film is ready for presentation and submission.				→

Figure 2. Sample Documentary Film Project Gantt Chart

Interview Guide. Since interviews are a primary tool for gathering data, the students may be asked to log on to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gh_9utCgIrk&feature=related to get tips on how to properly conduct interviews. The set of videos in this website is very helpful, especially for those who have not conducted interviews before. YouTube videos are an enticing technological resource that teachers may use to supplement classroom instruction. A set of guide questions like the one shown below, however, must be provided to check students' understanding, and succinct discussions must be held in the classroom to clear some ambiguities and to address some clarifying questions students might want to raise.

WORKSHEET: CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS
GUIDE QUESTIONS

NAME: _____ SECTION: _____ DATE: _____ SCORE: _____

Watch the videos on the prescribed websites very carefully and answer the following questions.

1. Interviewing requires following certain protocols. What are these protocols?
   _____

2. Who are experts? Give examples.
   _____

3. Enumerate the ways to find experts.
   _____

4. What are the sources of information about an interviewee?
   _____

5. What are three possible ways of getting an interview?
   _____

6. How can interview appointments be secured? What is the very first thing you tell the interviewees?
   _____

7. What two considerations are of prime importance when setting an appointment with the interviewees?
   _____

8. How can rapport be established in an interview?
   _____

9. What is the ideal number of interview questions?
   _____

10. What are the two types of interview questions?
   _____

11. What is the best way to keep the records of an interview? What is transcription?
   _____

12. What must be done after the interview?
   _____

Figure 3. Worksheet for Conducting Interviews

Scoring Rubric. After all the objectives in the Gantt chart have been realized and consultations with the teacher have been done, the students are prepared for the presentation of their documentaries. Their documentary films are shown to the whole class not only for critiquing and grading but also for creating awareness and advocacy. Each film is evaluated not only by the teacher but also by the other members of the class randomly chosen to be members of the pool of critics. Comments elicited from the students themselves are made constructive so that future similar projects would be more commendable than what the students have already made. To ensure the objectivity of marking, the following rubric designed by and adapted from Williamson (2010) may be used.

CATEGORY	A	B	C	D	F
Purpose 50 pts.	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains a clear focus throughout.	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains focus for most of the presentation.	There are a few lapses in focus, but the purpose is fairly clear.	It is difficult to figure out the purpose of the presentation.	Documentary has no evident purpose and/or focus.
Audience Awareness 40 pts.	Strong awareness of audience in the design. It is obvious why the vocabulary, audio, and graphics were chosen to fit the target audience.	Some awareness of audience in the design. It is clear why the vocabulary, audio, and graphics were chosen to fit the target audience.	Some awareness of audience in the design. It is difficult to see why vocabulary, audio, and graphics were chosen to fit the target audience.	Limited awareness of the needs and interests of the target audience.	No awareness of audience.
Ethos: Is the documentary credible? 30 pts.	Documentary uses strong arguments and evidence to display credibility.	Most of the documentary's arguments and evidence is strong.	Documentary's arguments and evidence are uneven in quality; overall they are adequate.	One or more of the documentary's arguments and evidence is significantly weak.	Documentary does not use any effective arguments or evidence.
Pathos: Documentary appeals to the viewers' values and beliefs. 30 pts.	Documentary uses effective strategies to appeal to the viewers' values and beliefs.	Most of the documentary's appeals to the viewers' values and beliefs are effective.	Documentary's appeals to the viewers' values and beliefs are uneven, though overall they are adequate.	One or more of the documentary's appeals to the viewers' values and beliefs are significantly inadequate.	Documentary did not use any effective appeals to the viewers' values and beliefs.
Logos: Is the piece well organized? Logical? 30 pts.	Documentary's organization and logic are excellent.	Most of the documentary's organization and logic are excellent.	Documentary's organization and logic are uneven, though overall they are adequate.	Documentary has at least one major problem with organization and/or logic.	Documentary does not use effective organization and/or logic.
Timing 20 pts.	Documentary has exactly the right amount of detail throughout. It does not drag or speed by.	Documentary's timing is mostly good, though it seems to drag somewhat OR need slightly more detail in one or two sections.	Documentary seems to need more revision. It is noticeably too long or too short in more than one section.	Documentary needs extensive revision. It is too long or too short to be interesting.	Documentary has no regard for timing or revision.

Figure 4. Assessment Rubric for Documentary Film Project

Reflection Paper. Because reflection is an integral part of the teaching-learning process, the students should be given opportunities to reflect on their documentary project experiences. A meeting or two may be allotted for sharing of insights and reflections. The reflection guide questions below may be adapted as a template for students' use. In the writer's case, the following responses were generated from the students.

"I realized a lot of things in making this documentary. Simply hearing bad things happening really is different from seeing it for yourself. I saw poverty, child labor and lack of education first-hand. It is heartbreaking to see how many out of school youth children are in the Philippines. These children cannot even afford to go to school, and what's worse is that they have to work to survive. I definitely learned a lot from this documentary. I also realized how blessed I am for having the things I have. And it made me truly appreciate the things I have in my life. I can only hope that this problem can be addressed by our government. I believe it's about time that we recognize this problem, because if not, what will happen to the Philippines? Will our country soon be an illiterate society? I mean, that may not be too far from happening considering that poverty in the Philippines is becoming widespread. I also hope that our documentary will reach more audiences." –Inna Bunda, Communication Arts Major

"After being able to have the opportunity to make our own documentary about education of street children, I realized so many things. First would be the importance of good education in building a better future for myself....Also, after watching the other documentaries my classmates made, I have been encouraged to update myself about current events and inspired to read in order to deepen my knowledge and understanding. It is sad to know that many people give importance to the least important things like gossips. It is very heart-breaking to know that there are people who strive to learn to read, write and learn despite the many things hindering them to do these while some when already given everything they need, just disregard and put to waste the blessings showered upon them." – Ivana Bito, Communication Arts Major

Figure 5. Reflection Guide Questions

For a critical analysis and reflection on another film, the students may be asked to choose a documentary other than what their group has produced. The students are instructed to decide on a video which to them is the most striking among those shown to their class. The following guide questions may be used to lead the students to analysis and reflection.

Figure 6. Guide Questions for Analysis of and Reflection on a Documentary Film

Sample Documentary Videos

The following are sample documentary videos produced by two groups of communication arts majors from the Faculty of Arts and Letters, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. It must be noted that the students were allowed to use Filipino in filming the documentaries since local issues that involve ordinary Filipinos may be best investigated through the use of their national language. English subtitles, however, need to be provided so that foreign students may understand and appreciate the material.

The first documentary video entitled *Ate Pabasa Po (Sister, Please Let Me Read)* talks about how inaccessible a quality education can be for the underprivileged and underserved sector of Philippine society. The documentary focuses on street children in the Philippines and how miserable their life condition can be without formal schooling. It also shows that street children hardly read or write as a result of working at an early age and not having an opportunity to go to school.

The second documentary entitled *Tik-Tikan (Pry and Poke)* centers on the kind of reading materials Filipino readers prefer. It is about which type of newspaper sells out more readily and if people read broadsheets more often than tabloids. It shows how pervasive reading tabloids and other uninformative, pornographic, and trivial newspapers is in the Philippines. These two videos investigate some glaring realities that have to do with reading in the Philippine context. Although simple technical programs and tools are used, the documentaries are able to unearth issues that have to be expeditiously addressed.

Conclusion

The use of documentary projects supplements and enforces classroom instruction. Through this, the students are motivated to utilize technology, work collaboratively, practice critical and higher order thinking skills, and heighten their awareness of certain relevant and arguable issues. Having students independently produce documentary films not only in reading courses but also in other subject area courses where English is the medium of instruction can prove to be invaluable since such an assignment requires work in all skills and allows for any number of issues to be explored. It is imperative that students today have the opportunity to engage a variety of issues and realities and that they be prompted to find ways to advocate for change as well as individual and collective action. If students are further trained to engage in reading,

research, exploration, and questioning, then teachers are not just teaching what students should learn, they also provide them with a platform for refining the learning process itself.

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