

**REPORT: *Possibilities for the teaching and practice
of documentary video at a midwest college***

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Executive Summary

The technical revolution in digital video now makes it possible to get good picture and sound, even for broadcast, with inexpensive equipment, and edit those materials in desktop computer systems. This presents exciting opportunities for higher education. Among other things, it now makes the high arts of documentary filmmaking—once the preserve of a small guild of filmmakers—now available to many with modest equipment, time, and good coaching. As a craft-based industry in which people normally learn in apprentice-fashion working alongside skilled practitioners in small teams, documentary filmmaking can be most effectively taught, in part, by coaching students through a stream of practical assignments and projects through which they learn, develop and sharpen relevant skills: camera and lighting, sound, editing, producing/directing, interviewing, and all the “people-work” involved.

Moreover, that stream of projects and assignments can be tailored to connect effectively with other courses and programs at the college and in the wider community. For example, the Public Museum of the college’s home city is just beginning to develop a major exhibit to portray the ethnic communities of the city through “family stories,” which it plans to present partly through video. Students could be taught documentary skills, in part, through working on projects which help tell those stories. Those projects could, in turn, connect with a host of ongoing courses and programs at the college: for example, with service-learning projects in the Latino community of Burton Heights (or in other communities); with historian James Bratt’s work on religion and the city, or religion professor Charles Farhadian’s plans to have students study the life of the city’s mosques; with historian Randal Jelks’ work on its African-American community, or Dick Harms’ on its Dutch heritage; or with urban sociology and ethnography students eager to explore what digital video makes possible for their kinds of research; etc., etc. In addition, by collaborating with documentary video teams in these assignments, faculty and students from all these disciplines and programs would have the opportunity to learn more about the nature of modern digital video as an educational tool, and become involved in work in and around the college’s new communications center.

Or, to develop their skills, student documentarians could be given simple assignments to capture real-life events on campus, like some the steady stream of luminaries visiting the college. Students could film visiting scholars and artists not only performing, but also interacting with students and colleagues, as well as speaking, in interview, about their formation, their work, and their lives. (For some of the many other kinds of assignments students might fulfill on campus to develop their skills see the complete Report).

Furthermore, once real-life scenes are captured and edited into sequences that work, digital video now makes it easy to create multiple “products” from those same materials. For instance, the same footage capturing a return visit to the college by the renown philosopher Alvin Plantinga, could be used, in different versions, for: (1) philosophy courses at the college year after year; (2) other courses around the country (and the world); (3) on a web-site devoted to reporting campus events and continuing to shape the minds of alumni; etc., etc. These different materials can also be put on a DVD in ways that permit supple, flexible, and interactive use for a wide variety of educational purposes. The same strategy for making multiple use of the same materials can be pursued in any of the projects discussed above. And all this could be part and parcel of teaching documentary video at the college’s new communications center.