

CREATING A CURRICULUM GUIDE FOR YOUR DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Preproduction is the perfect time to begin writing a curriculum/discussion guide to accompany your documentary film. Although you may not have all the tools necessary to complete the guide, you can certainly identify concepts and themes of the film that should be included in one; this work can only hone the final film itself.

One of the first decisions to make for a curriculum/discussion guide is whether or not the content is appropriate for a K-12 classroom. This information will determine how the guide is structured – according to state standards for public schools or for an adult audience. The sections that are discussed below – objectives, suggested uses, questions and activities, vocabulary, and resources – may or may not have a place in your guide, but they are the basic building blocks of any lesson plan and should, therefore, be considered.

CURRICULUM FOR K-12 STUDENTS

When writing the curriculum guide for your film, you should begin with a section on objectives that explains, in brief and open language, preferably bulleted, what students will learn or be able to do after watching the film and participating in the activities. This is where you can refer to the academic standards that every State Education Department or equivalent entity publishes, accessible at <http://edstandards.org>. While the frameworks vary greatly – most are broken down by grade level and subject – they can provide you with some idea of what teachers are held accountable for in that state. Many states now have standards specifically incorporating the use of media. For example, Texas expects students to “analyze, interpret, and produce” media and electronic resources beginning in fourth grade and continuing through high school (TEKS).

Referencing the state standards in your objectives can prove to administrators and parents that your film does indeed have educational value, making the teacher’s job a little easier when defending the use of such films. It will also lend an air of legitimacy to the film for librarians who have the tricky job of negotiating the needs of teachers against dwindling budgets.

Even films with a national audience can incorporate such objectives into their guide; objectives provide purpose, direction, and structure to the classes that will view your film, thereby making the experience a fruitful one for both teachers and students. An example of academic standards, other than those state-specific ones mentioned above, can be found at the Global Classroom Website for PBS’ Wide Angle series, provided by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.

Along with the objectives, you should include a note to the educator with suggested uses for the film, such as different types of audiences (photojournalism students, families of people with Alzheimer’s, union workers, activists), or events and activities (as a fundraiser or community outreach program, in a classroom lesson or counseling session.) Brainstorming a list of this type can also assist you in planning the distribution of your film, especially if you plan on distributing it yourself. Social interest documentaries will especially benefit from this list of audiences, as well as the curriculum/discussion guide itself, because they are often accompanied by outreach activities to aid the distribution of the film and efficacy of the message.

There are two items that I think every K-12 curriculum guide should include that discussion guides for adults do not necessarily need to

have (although they may still benefit from the inclusion of such items): activities for different learning styles and questions for different academic levels. Start the inquiry with a review of the film’s content and simple recall questions. Words on a screen can be accompanied by voiceover or a narrator to reach both aural and visual learners. Then, the teacher can pause the tape after each question to give the students time to respond.

Curriculum guides will probably all include written, spoken, and listening activities, such as “Write a response to the film and share with your neighbor,” but teachers also need activities based on other learning styles – such as musical, kinesthetic, spatial, and logical learning styles – to fit the needs of their students. A guide for a film about musicians could include composing and performing music, while a guide for a film about salsa could suggest learning the dance itself. Less obviously, a film that discusses the economic ramifications of globalization could easily integrate math lessons into the curriculum guide. Many teachers, especially at the elementary and middle school level can incorporate interdisciplinary activities easily into their schedule. Elementary teachers usually teach more than one subject, while middle school teachers often work together on teams or cadres. However, high school teachers, who often feel as if they are isolated in their classroom, may have a more difficult time garnering the support and materials necessary for an interdisciplinary response. For these teachers, questions and activities that are focused on their content area yet also incorporate multiple learning styles are incredibly helpful.

Similarly, there are many different levels of learners within a single classroom; the teacher and the curriculum must accommodate these differences as well. One way to do this is suggest a variety of follow-up activities that range from recalling simple bits of information to answering essay questions to synthesizing outside resources and creating a new product, like a map, poem, letter, video, dance, or piece of art. Teachers not only need a good amount of activity suggestions, but they also need a wide variety of them to accommodate the wide variety of student needs. Providing a range of activities enables the teacher to tailor the assignment for different levels of learners, as well as assign a combination of activities to one learner, providing for a well-rounded response to the film. Students like and appreciate the opportunity to evaluate information in the context of their own lives; therefore, including questions like, “What would you do?” will enable a diversity, intimacy, and creativity to their responses.

ADULT AUDIENCES

If your discussion guide is for an adult audience, then you will need to accommodate discussions that may not take place in a classroom setting. Academic standards may not be necessary for educational settings outside of the classroom, but the group, who may be coming together for the first time, could benefit from preparation before they watch the film. Establishing expectations for behavior, like confidentiality and compassion as Tracy Droz Tragos does in the guide for her film *Be Good, Smile Pretty*, can alleviate anxiety. Allowing each participant to write down what they hope to gain from the discussion can steer the direction of the meeting. In fact, answering questions and writing down ideas about the topic before watching the film, provides great discussion material after the film. Audiences can discuss their preconceptions, and perhaps misconceptions, and compare them to new knowledge they acquire from watching the film.

Regardless of whether the audience consists of adults or students, including two key sections – words, concepts, and definitions and links and resources – will only heighten the level of understanding of both the viewer and the facilitator. In your section on words, concepts, and definitions, you should certainly include any specialized terminology or concept the subjects of the film use. You can also include filmic terminology, words like ‘subjectivity’ and ‘reflexivity’, which the viewer may want to discuss but have difficulty articulating without the assistance of clarification. Previewing the film to lay audiences will assist you in

determining the types of issues and questions that may arise in thorough conversations.

Including a section on links and resources at the end of your guide will suggest that you are seriously invested in the outcome of the event/person/situation that you filmed, and that the audience can do something too. Heather Courtney and Kerry Richardson, in their guide for her film *The Workers/Los Trabajadores*, included several current websites that the viewer can refer to for updates, legal initiatives, and assistance. Making these connections is essential to exacting social change, but it also makes for a much more powerful viewing experience, one not easily forgotten by audience members. The guide itself will often appear as the content of a website, in which case online activities, like research, streaming additional video and audio, or even arranging for real-time web chats with the filmmaker or subject, can be included.

DISTRIBUTION

As evidenced by their continuing publication, curriculum/discussion guides can be a boon for distribution of your documentary film; however, you should also be aware that the existence of such a guide does not make or break the distribution deal or the purchase of the video. In fact, most instructors at the college level do not use the guides, favoring their own curriculum instead. Audio-visual collections at universities and community colleges, such as those at the University of North Texas, seek to “support the instruction and research needs” of their staff and students, especially in the core and elective courses. Librarians selecting materials for their collections often favor titles that “hold an interdisciplinary interest” (Hurt Powerpoint). Often, a librarian will not purchase a title until a professor requests it. Marketing titles to professors will make them aware that your film exists and perhaps spur them to request the librarian to acquire the film.

New Day Films includes many online discussion guides with the films that the cooperative distributes, and all are written by the filmmakers. The online resources for PBS’ Wide Angle, Independent Lens, and POV are written by the filmmakers with assistance or coauthors from the programs. This suggests that the guide is simply a reflection of the filmmaker’s initiatives, unless the film is included in a pre-established program that expects follow-up resources. It also suggests that the guide does not determine whether or not a film is picked up for distribution, although it may influence some librarians and others to purchase it. Given a choice between two films on the same topic, at the same price, with only one accompanied by a discussion/curriculum guide, a librarian will choose the one with ancillary support.

Ultimately, a guide will aid in the purchase of distributed films at the K-12 level and for adult audiences, but not necessarily at the college level. And regardless of the guide, the film stands alone when it is considered for distribution. However, the guide sends a powerful statement to audiences, teachers, and librarians alike, a statement of commitment and ongoing concern for the reception of the film and the lives of the subjects after the filmmaking stops. Ultimately, it is these rich experiences of connecting what one sees in a film with the reality of everyday life that foster wonder, interest, and outreach into the world. This is the understanding that teachers and librarians want to provide for their students.

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