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Documentary and Collaboration: Placing the Camera in the Community

ELIZABETH COFFMAN

IN THE LAST DECADE, DOCUMENTARY FILMS have experienced a surge in mainstream popularity, as demonstrated by the financial and critical successes of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), and *March of the Penguins* (2005). The public's appetite for documentaries has increased, and the costs for production have decreased. In both developed and developing nations, much of the world has gained access to lower-cost video equipment, to the Internet, and to uploading content on sites such as YouTube or MySpace. Soldiers in the Middle East carry video cameras, and teenagers are attaching them in creative ways to their bodies. Cameras of many kinds are worn 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and material is streamed live on the Internet.¹

Contrary to fears that the age of cinema is ending, this new age of digital media offers *more*, not fewer, opportunities for individuals or groups interested in producing documentary work.² Documentary opportunities exist beyond the feature film industry and its traditional, author-centered documentary genres—the devastating, direct cinema films of Fred Wiseman or the performative, political comedies of Michael Moore. Many organizations also recognize that “getting their story told” on film or video is im-

portant, both for promotional reasons (gaining audiences, donors, grants) and for journalistic ones (gaining political exposure in their communities). Rather than waiting for an individual filmmaker to identify them as storytelling “material,” though, groups are beginning to seek filmmaking assistance on their own. Getting one's story told—*well-told*—is more affordable now too, which means that new opportunities exist nationally and internationally for trained filmmakers to work with nonprofit groups or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These communities are actively seeking documentary filmmakers, just as many filmmakers continue to solicit these communities for storytelling access and support.

What this means for documentary students is that they face an increasing array of choices for producing stories and collaborating with diverse subjects. In addition to being exposed to the “basics” of feature film and television production, media students should also be ready for new audiences and coproducers for their projects. Documentary students, like journalism students, should be confident with discerning the differences (and the overlaps) between journalistic storytelling, public relations work, and advocacy work—boundaries that often get blurred in collaborative projects. At the same time, students should be introduced to the different “layers” of documentary media work—from the more traditional, larger-budget studio practices to the less traditional, lower-budget, independent efforts that involve self-funding, grant writing, working with community media

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centers, or accessing university equipment to help cover the costs of materials.

This article addresses some of the questions surrounding collaborative documentary work by examining the case studies and challenges of four filmmakers—two professionals and two academics. The professionals and their production companies collaborate with communities in less “traditional” ways that affect content, interaction, and distribution, and the academics bring these collaborative techniques into the classroom, while also producing their own independent work. These case studies help to answer the following educational questions:

- How do instructors teach documentary students collaborative media skills that go beyond the classical production techniques for film and television?
- How do filmmakers assist community groups with telling their own stories in ways that benefit both parties?
- To what extent should filmmakers collaborate on content ideas or review material with community members?
- Should filmmakers assist community members with basic technology training or with putting media tools into the hands of their subjects?
- How is collaborative documentary filmmaking a learning tool for issues of race, class, injustice, and opportunity?

Storytelling practices and critical thinking skills are consistently taught in the media classroom, along with technical expertise. “Convergence” is not news to anyone, but the emphasis in the classroom so far has been on digital media technologies rather than on the convergence of new resources or the possibilities for collaborative productions. Collaboration, if addressed directly in classrooms at all, is taught more frequently in courses that focus on narrative or studio production, rather than on documentary production. Media instructors discuss how production crews work together, identifying who is in charge of various aspects of production work, some ego/control/privacy

issues, and then, almost as an afterthought, considering how filmmakers work directly with subjects for content development or distribution benefits. Documentary textbooks tend to address collaboration in terms of working with subjects to elicit better interviews on camera, achieving more effective eyeline contact, or improving a subject’s “comfort level” with recording equipment.³ Most textbooks do not go into great depth about collaborations that cross those indistinct “boundary” lines of advocacy work versus documentation and news versus self-expression or address questions of content control. Discussing how much involvement subjects or groups may have, if any, with content decisions or access to technology is almost never brought up.⁴ The assumption is that the “filmmakers” make all content decisions and control all technology, and the discussion usually ends there.

As the case studies in this article reveal, there are multiple ways to develop films in collaborative partnerships with groups and communities. And there are multiple challenges for completing collaborative documentary projects with the best possible outcomes. The four case studies demonstrate strategies for meeting these challenges, as well as providing a strategic roadmap for filmmakers, instructors, and students to produce collaborative documentary work effectively. In the first case, Robin Smith of Video/Action describes producing and distributing numerous documentary collaborations, particularly with women and nonprofit organizations that represent socially disadvantaged groups. Around similar themes, Gordon Quinn of Kartemquin Films focuses on the importance of long-term outreach with the communities that have helped his company produce successful independent films and television projects. Independent filmmaker and university professor Andy Garrison has coproduced the *East Austin Stories* with community members and college students in order to provide his students with more “authentic” storytelling experiences. My own example examines the coproduction of short documentaries by university students, faculty, community

members, and high school students who share interdisciplinary content and development ideas with each other.⁵

In order to appropriately contextualize these case studies, though, it is necessary to first provide an overview of documentary media methods because, as Andy Garrison describes it, “*accurate, fiction, and true* are pretty slippery ideas when you get close to them, as should be *collaboration and community*” (e-mail, 11/18/2007).

Terms for Collaborative Media Work

- *Producers*—The individual or group who initiates content ideas, figures out financing, and provides equipment for a media project.
- *Subject*—The individuals or groups who compose the subject matter or are actors for the media project.
- *Community*—The group, defined by shared characteristics, qualities, or interests, who support or are connected to the subject matter for the media work.
- *Filmmakers*—The individuals or groups who are trained in media production and storytelling techniques and have access to production and postproduction equipment.
- *Distribution benefits*—Those concrete and abstract benefits from the media work, which may include financial gains (sales, grant monies, tax benefits), improved public relations (for filmmakers and/or community), and artistic, educational, or historical value (defined through self-expression and peer-review).

Mysteries of Storytelling: Relations between Maker and Subject

Media educators are compelled to address the challenges of storytelling every semester in the classroom by teaching students how good stories are found and developed and not turned into, as Sheila Curran Bernard describes, “diatribes” (52). Although the particulars of

casting and story structure are generally well addressed both in the classroom and in textbooks, what is not discussed as much are the “mysterious,” creative, or ethical processes that develop between maker and subject in collaborative production settings. The interactions between students and communities—as in “civic engagement” or “experiential learning” exercises—contain many of the same challenges that exist between filmmakers and their subjects.⁶ Documentary interactions between subject and maker are distinctive for a variety of nonfiction projects and often cross disciplinary boundaries between journalism, anthropology, theater, and cinema in discussions of issues such as interviewing, on-camera performance, questions of framing, or sound. Developing ongoing media relations with communities while still maintaining objectivity for one’s subject has been a challenge for documentarians for decades.

Since Jean Rouch’s ethnographic documentary work in the 1940s and 1950s in West Africa, filmmakers, anthropologists, and academics have struggled with definitions that challenge our understanding of objective and subjective information or research methods that split the social sciences from the humanities. Quantitative documentation means one thing. Qualitative is quite another. As Frederick Wiseman defines it, “[a] documentary is just another form of fiction. It is arbitrary . . . made up. It doesn’t follow the natural order. Its major sequences are shorter than they are in real time. They acquire meaning they wouldn’t have in isolation. What’s magical about a good film is magical about a good play or a good novel. If you try to define it, you’re a fool. . . .”⁷ The superior storytelling of Wiseman’s work has kept many writers from trying to define “it” further, but as many students know, academics have a tendency to plunge into topics others define as “foolish.”

The first ethnographic filmmaker, Rouch, both ideologically and practically separated out the filmmaker from the subject, or the “document” from the camera, and then he also *refused* to separate them. Rouch describes

an evolving, “shared” relationship between himself and his subjects.⁸ According to Rouch, documentarians experience something similar to an ongoing “ethno-dialogue” with their subjects. The two sides (filmmaker and subject) participate in a collaborative relationship, but it is a relationship in which the filmmaker maintains an *ethno*-perspective throughout. Documentarians, according to Rouch, divide their attention between a *cine* and an *ethno* perspective—remaining aware of the framing choices of their subjects, as much as of cultural, or interpersonal issues.

Research into ethnographic filmmaking is helpful for describing the challenges with collaborative documentary work, given that both areas document stories that frequently surround issues of cultural and historic conflicts. Visual anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers define the relationship between the subject and the filmmaker in particularly careful ways. “Even more than conventional documentarians,” asserts J. Hoberman, “visual anthropologists are compelled to consider the relation of the filmmaker (and the film process) to the filmed” (Barbash and Taylor 1). Documentary filmmakers Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor highlight the ethical issues between maker and subject in ethnographic filmmaking, which, they claim, is “by nature collaborative. Quite simply, it’s impossible to make a film about other people completely on your own . . . Collaboration entails complicated power plays and difficult negotiations” (74). “Power plays” or cultural “negotiations” are also witnessed in documentary films by Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Ross McElwee, and even Les Blank—filmmakers with definite personal voices, who negotiate with their subjects on camera in a variety of complicated ways.

The direct cinema practices of Wiseman, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and the Maysles brothers do not tell filmmakers much about how to collaborate with their subjects because direct cinema prioritizes invisibility—achieved through “fly on the wall” cinematography—and a singularity of vision, over other outcomes. As Albert Maysles describes in

the subject-maker encounters for *Salesman* (1968), their filmmakers would shoot first and explain later:

The salesman would knock on the door, and I would have to make a judgment then and there whether to start filming at that moment—which I did sometimes—or whether to put the camera down. Then, maybe he would start chatting, and I would be filming. Then, not so long after that, Paul or Raymond [one of the salesmen] would introduce us by name, and we would usually explain why we were there (Barbash and Taylor 334).

The value of capturing subjects who are unprepared for the camera is evident in the Maysles brothers’ filmmaking. The awkward “truthfulness” of their encounters with their subjects has impressed documentary viewers for decades, just as, in similar ways, neo-realist and new wave aesthetics continues to impress feature film viewers.

Clearly, Wiseman and the Maysles brothers completed enough collaborative work with the communities surrounding their media subjects to gain access to their subjects in “uncomfortable” moments. Wiseman’s creative process—his personal time commitment, as well as smaller equipment and production crews—allowed for his cameras’ piercing insights into and across his subjects’ institutional boundaries. But Wiseman’s perseverance and powerful storytelling techniques do not necessarily make his former communities open to the next filmmaker who comes along and wants to produce more work with the community again.⁹ Gaining a community’s trust without actively incorporating some of that community’s vision of themselves carries its own set of costs—such as being able to maintain that community’s trust into the future.

The “shoot first, explain later” approach has a necessary place in documentary practices and should not be dropped, as long as filmmakers are conscious of the ethical implications. By privileging this assertive, personal approach, though, more empathetic methods for interacting with subjects tend to get over-

looked and undervalued. In an op-ed piece for *The Independent*, Pat Aufderheide asserts, “Collaboration flies in the face of the heroic myth of the independent filmmaker,” a “myth” that she describes as a dated concept and one that avoids the realities of producing work. Establishing partnerships with interested organizations, for example, is an important option for any documentary producer to consider. “Can partnerships and collaboration limit a filmmaker’s creative freedom?” Aufderheide asks. “This common concern is better stood on its head. Can isolation, lack of resources, and lack of feedback stunt a filmmaker’s creativity?” The answer for educators and their students should be obvious. Collaborative media skills are important for nonfiction production work financially, politically, and historically.

Perhaps the two extremes of nonfiction storytelling in media—hierarchical, film production and collaborative, community media work—should not be any further apart in the classroom than are the histories of independent filmmakers and Hollywood studio directors. Teaching Michael Moore and Frederick Wiseman may be just as important as teaching the history of Top Value Television (TVTV), Paper Tiger Television, or, as this article discusses, Kartemquin Films and the Dayton Community Media Workshop. In the early 1970s, TVTV demonstrated that Portapak video was competent for national broadcast, as long as the subject was worthy of national attention. Handheld, lower-end technology was capable of important storytelling by the nonprofessional public, as public access and independent television demonstrated.¹⁰ The renewed interest in the history of these early “video artists” and recent transformations in the digital media world demonstrate a need and justification for teaching toward all types of storytelling practices—studio, independent, and community media. From higher-end Hollywood film production to lower-end cell phone videos, the Web has democratized media access and distribution. Educators recognize how the nature of distribution on the Web changes the parameters of media production, in part

because they know the history of early television and its impact on filmmaking.

A closer examination of community media offers additional clues for thinking about the costs and benefits of collaboration in the digital age. Collaborative media practices, such as those found in “community media,” involve histories that are usually separated out from the teaching of feature filmmaking or broadcast productions for many reasons. Negative stereotypes of community media methods abound (e.g., *Wayne’s World* [1992]). Public access television, for instance, is often represented as a media practice that is unprofitable, technically imperfect, and only interesting to a small, specialized audience. But the guerilla media methods or collaborative production techniques that are found in independent and community media help to provide the narrative foundations for reality-based television shows and other new, interactive productions. The popularity of recording subjects informally, or having them record themselves for sensational purposes by using “home movie” cameras, guarantees larger audience numbers and affordable production costs, but not, necessarily, much critical credibility. As Ellie Rennie notes, “[c]ommunity media has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, even within the field of media studies itself. If anything, this deficiency reinforces the assumptions of marginality that surround community media” (16). Barbash and Taylor acknowledge that “some critics charge that the very concept of collaboration is a chimera.” But Barbash and Taylor also address the issue that is at the heart of subject-maker tensions: “the danger is that the filmmaker may remain the real author, with the participants simply being brought in to legitimate a collaborative rubber stamp” (88–89). It should not be surprising, then, that most documentary filmmakers and educators have not embraced the lessons from “marginalized” or “alternative” collaborative media but rather draw from the more professionalized history and language of filmmaking—authorship seems to be in question with collaborative work.

A growing number of exceptions exist,

though. Canada's *Challenge for Change* program, Paper Tiger Television, Chiapas Media Project, Indymedia, Videofreex, Raindance Corporation, Ant Farm, and even the Cuban Film School (ICAIC) have been some of the important, historical exceptions connected with community or "guerilla" media. These recognized groups have worked in politically and artistically direct ways with video technology, and many have placed the tools of media production into the hands of the underprivileged and underserved—the unprofessional public. Feature films have been investigating handing the equipment to subjects as well. For example, Kirby Dick's *Chain Camera* (2001), which was edited from the footage of ten cameras distributed to Los Angeles high school students for a year, and Ellen Frankenstein's *No Loitering* (2005), which uses footage shot by restless Alaskan teenagers, both demonstrate the growing critical interest in media collaborations with subjects. New NGOs, such as *Film Aid International*, a volunteer organization with Robert De Niro on its advisory board, is committed to "use the power of film to promote health, strengthen communities, and enrich the lives of the world's vulnerable and uprooted." Film Aid's mission states that their members "collaborate with local communities in program design, implementation and evaluation" of film works that they help to produce.¹¹ But as with the "shoot first, ask later" tactics of direct cinema, or the performative Michael Moore-like approaches to a subject, electing to place the camera in the "hands" of the community is just another option for interactions between maker and subject, particularly given that the subject may already have some kind of camera in their hands.

Production companies such as Kartemquin Films and Video/Action, as well as community media organizations such as the Dayton Community Media Workshop, include "collaborative" goals as part of their mission statement. Using the term "collaborative" means everything from assisting with content development to coproducing educational materials and screenings. Collaborative media production and classical studio production practices do

not have to remain in an either/or structure in the classroom, but can coexist successfully in a both/and relationship. The increasing number of collaborative documentary projects suggests that collaboration should be discussed more specifically in the media classroom in addition to studio hierarchies and independent production techniques. The following case studies offer examples of authentic and successful interactions between students, filmmakers, subjects, and communities with interesting stories to share.

Video/Action—Collaborating with Nonprofits

Video/Action is a Washington, D.C.-based media production company that has completed over 200 documentary media projects in the last two decades for local, regional, and national broadcast on issues relating to women and minorities, based around collaborations with nonprofit organizations. Their mission statement specifically includes the goal of collaborating with nonprofits and other communities, many of which are listed on their Web site.¹² When I asked Video/Action founder Robin Smith about the nature of collaborating with nonprofits for documentary work, she responded in an e-mail with an extensive list of media projects that outline the developmental links between communities and stories:

What I love about the [production] experience is that each new project grew out of a previous one. I began working with homeless families—*Shooting Back: Photography by Homeless Children* (1991) . . . and that led to residential treatment program advocates for pregnant addicts—*Women of Substance* (1993) . . . which led to family violence support groups with incarcerated women—*We Are Not Who You Think We Are* (1995) . . . and that ultimately led to over 75 productions with activists assisting crime victims: domestic violence; children in the wake of violence; human trafficking . . . On a parallel track I found myself immersed in a broad range of issues affecting underserved populations—*A Call to Care* (1996)—looking

at how religious women established health care for the poor; *No Goal Too High* (2006) about a young woman living with spina bifida; education opportunities for minority youth—*Building Educated Leaders for Life* (2005) and civil rights in the segregated South, *Come Walk in My Shoes* (2007) to name a few of the communities. (2/6/2008)

Video/Action's productions are built around their interviews and do not use "expert" or celebrity voiceovers. The interviewing process is a key element for their media collaborations—from learning about a subject's story to gaining their trust and then providing the content of the documentary.

The Video/Action filmmakers frequently meet with and interview social workers as a part of this story-building process, which assists them in acquiring the trust that is necessary for interviews as well as forms of social service support during production. Video/Action provides an unusual amount of permission rights for filmed subjects—not a recommended practice in many production books. According to Smith, "[e]very subject is given a release form to sign, and they have the option to control the use of their interview—they can even withdraw it after the fact if they want to. Having an opportunity to tell one's story is an integral part of the healing process, and we do everything we can to avoid re-victimization of vulnerable individuals." Video/Action, similar to the other filmmakers and companies discussed in the following sections, has experimented with a variety of methods for creative control of material, with an equal variety of results. But Smith is quite clear that collaborative documentary methods with the community have been artistically, socially, and financially rewarding for her company and the communities she has represented.

Kartemquin—Educational Outreach

Kartemquin Films is a Chicago-based production company that began with a more guerilla media style of collaboration and then developed into a company that produces feature-length documentary films and television series for international

distribution. Their guerilla tactics are obvious in one of their early films, *Inquiring Nuns* (1968), which begins with the filmmakers training two Catholic Sisters (dressed in full habit) how to use microphones in the back seat of a car. This training occurs just before the nuns walk up to Chicagoans on the street and ask random citizens in Jean Rouch ethnographic style, "What makes you happy?" As Kartemquin president and founding member Gordon Quinn asserted in a phone interview, Kartemquin worked extensively with groups as diverse as nuns, striking factory workers, immigrants, and public health organizations as well as with corporations such as Chrysler or organizations such as Active Voice to acquire support and sponsorship and "to create a structure" for outreach (2/7/08). Kartemquin's documentary, or "guerilla," tactics have developed into more classical, documentary research methods, as seen in *Hoop Dreams* (1994) or in the PBS series *The New Americans* (2004). But even with feature film and national broadcast productions, Kartemquin is dedicated to outreach and follow-up with subjects and communities.

Quinn asserts that many filmmakers, such as himself, are not interested in a single, national broadcast and then having their projects disappear into the "ether" world of documentary filmmaking. Kartemquin producers spend extensive amounts of time on civic engagement and outreach for films, as they did with *Hoop Dreams* (1994), for which they completed a student play-book and teacher guide for schools. Kartemquin has also completed outreach by partnering with other collaborative media organizations, as they did with *The New Americans* series and Active Voice.¹³ Active Voice organizers set up meetings with immigrant organizations, screened parts of the series, and then would "come up with a plan" generated by materials in the film, which included educational supplements for the community. Besides wanting to benefit the represented communities through the attention generated from a national broadcast, Kartemquin produces educational materials and subsequent screenings to extend the "life" of the media work and its distribution benefits. These benefits pay

Photo 1: Nuns receive interviewing lessons from Kartemquin filmmakers in the back seat of car (*Inquiring Nuns*, Kartemquin, 1968).



Photo 2: Nuns inquire about “happiness” with a microphone.



off in all kinds of long-term ways for filmmakers and the community, as they have done for Kartemquin, which received a 2007 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Nonprofits, and for communities interested in interacting and developing materials from their work, as with *The New Americans*.¹⁴

East Austin Stories—Authentic Interactions for Students

Andy Garrison began his documentary career at Antioch College in Ohio in the mid-1970s with a group of filmmakers who wanted to “help change the problems [they] saw” in the world (e-mail, 5/7/2008). This group became the *Dayton Community Media Workshop* and

started producing film, radio, and “slide/tapes that [they] played outdoors in neighborhood parks.” Several significant independent filmmakers and producers developed out of this group.¹⁵ Around the same time, in Binghamton, New York, the Experimental Television Center began, and a group of filmmakers employed community media strategies with portable video equipment in upstate New York.¹⁶ Similar to Appalshop in eastern Kentucky, a group with whom Garrison also worked, these early media groups achieved long-term commitments from filmmakers, acquired public and private funding, and produced a wide range of community media projects with and about people from diverse backgrounds.¹⁷ These groups collaborated with their subjects to varying degrees



Photo 3: UT Austin student Elizabeth Lepe films Ginger Webb and John Cazares and their daughter Chia for “The History of the Green and White Store” (an East Austin Stories production screened at the South by Southwest Festival 2005). Photo by Rebecca McEntee, courtesy of *Austin American-Statesman*.

and developed media centers that encouraged training and distribution so that community members could begin to tell their own stories.

Garrison's professional and educational experiences, like Kartemquin's, cover a wide range of methods for collaborating with his subjects to represent their stories. His multi-year commitment to Dayton led him to a university teaching job at the University of Texas (UT), Austin, where he continues to complete his own documentary feature work and to develop collaborative media projects with his UT students and the Austin community—*East Austin Stories*. To produce *East Austin Stories*, Garrison brings his college students in to meet community groups and produce short films through collaborations with churches, high schools, and local organizations that worked in the East Austin community. Organizations and community leaders were concerned with how the community was “under stress” from the rapid housing transition in their neighborhood. Austin is a city with historic, ethnically diverse neighborhoods that are undergoing changes as a result of development.¹⁸ Garrison described the community in an e-mail:

When I began the class, East Austin was very much a place visitors were warned away from when they checked into hotels. It definitely had and still has many of the problems of poorer inner-city neighborhoods of color that other American city neighborhoods have. But it also has many vibrant neighborhoods with deep roots and extended networks. . . .

In an early East Austin project, UT students collaborated with East Austin High School students and a teacher, helping to put cameras into the community and assisting the high school students with producing more of their “own” stories, now streamed on the Web. Primarily, though, the short films of East Austin subjects are produced, shot, and edited by UT college students with Garrison's guidance, screened for the community upon completion, and then freely distributed over the Internet. By requiring his documentary students to produce, develop, and screen projects in repeated collaborations with

the East Austin community, Garrison has helped to produce a sustainable university initiative within two communities—UT Austin faculty and students and East Austin subjects and residents. The distribution benefits affect both communities in different but valuable ways—by providing “authentic” documentary experiences with an audience for the students and by contributing historic documentation, cultural expression, and some media training for the East Austin community. None of the benefits involve immediate financial gains.

Stand Up! Help Out!—Facilitating Community Involvement with Storytelling

For the past two years, Loyola University Chicago (LUC) faculty have formed an interdisciplinary “partnership” with the Chicago Housing Authority and the historic Bronzeville community on Chicago's South Side, which includes the Ida B. Wells housing development. This is the same housing community represented in Wiseman's 1997 documentary *Public Housing*, which the Wells Housing administrators remember vividly, but not very fondly.¹⁹ This notorious Chicago housing development built in 1941 is currently being torn down to make way for “mixed-income” housing. The School of Social Work at LUC initiated a partnership with the Bronzeville community members and LUC faculty in different university disciplines in order to assist young people with the housing transition. The LUC camps, which are supported by Chicago's *After School Matters* (ASM) program, address social service issues for the Bronzeville community and have included education, health, and conflict-resolution projects.²⁰ The high school students have visited universities, tutored elementary school children, organized community health fairs and a march against violence, interviewed city leaders, and recommended policy changes to the chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan.

The high school students have also learned media skills, documenting their work as a part of these camps, helping to design a Web site, interviewing subjects, and coproducing short films

Photo 4: Chicago high school student Devita Haynes interviews social workers Jeff Bulanda and Angel Pringle in *True Story: The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly* (Stand Up! Help Out! 2007).



Photo 5: Chicago high school student Jamel Sanders interviews a Chicago police captain at a march against violence that the students organized.



with the directing, shooting, and editing help of undergraduates. University students complete all editing and Web site construction, with feedback from the high school students on story ideas, overall Web design, and rough cuts. The university provides the server space and video equipment and purchases the domain name, and the community provides the content.²¹ The media production and Web work, titled Stand Up! Help Out!, have developed into a successful collaborative, community media project, which began as a broader social service endeavor.

In the case of both East Austin Stories and Stand Up! Help Out! the forces of redevelopment are dramatically transforming neighborhoods. These changes have caused the communities to reflect on their respective local histories, as they watch large parts of it disappear. These cultural and geographic changes also provide an opportunity for college filmmaking students to facilitate, instruct, and help to produce documentation of these changes.

The four community media projects previously described involve a variety of collaborations between different groups. Video/Action in Washington, D.C., develops story ideas and funding opportunities through their links with subjects and communities and a generous release policy. Kartemquin Films in Chicago has maintained a local, collaborative commitment with community educational follow-ups that have contributed to its national reputation. The Stand Up! Help

Out! media project involves university undergraduates, graduate students and faculty, urban research centers, public high school students, and city leaders—all working together in an interdisciplinary fashion to tell stories and improve services. East Austin Stories involves similar groupings of individuals and educational institutions, but with a focus more clearly on authentic, student-centered storytelling experiences.

But did these communities actually share their *differences* in these media collaborations? Were benefits really distributed equally?

In order to answer these questions, I will outline successes and missteps that happened along the way for these four media collaborators. Their different challenges are interconnected in some interesting ways. By outlining them, I hope to encourage other educators and filmmakers to work through the challenges in collaborative media projects in order to share some of the longer-term rewards.

Challenge 1: Media Is Not the Greatest Public Service Need for the Community

Media work, particularly documentary work, is considered to be a quick and easy supplement to other community activities and is often thought to remain in the “background.”

Media work was not the primary goal of Chicago’s Stand Up! Help Out! collaboration—social work was the focus. The inclusion of

media production was secondary to the goals of improving social services and self-confidence for the high school students. Initially, the filmmakers started with a direct cinema documentary approach, but it quickly became evident that the leadership in the community did not look favorably on this media approach and wanted to remain focused on social service goals. It became crucial for the group leaders to redefine specific goals, timelines, and expectations with the community leaders for our media involvement: for example, it was agreed that undergraduates would provide video training skills, document significant events and speakers, and arrange screenings for the community.

The East Austin Stories project had a different kind of starting point but was also connected to the desire for college students to experience direct community involvement and story gathering. Garrison wanted his students “to look locally for stories and to have a model of documentary making that was not extractive, but [could] build a body of work accessible to the communities from which the stories come.” This desire was related to Garrison’s interest in allowing his students to make “work for authentic audiences, not for me or the other students. To have the work seen by the people in the work, and their friends and neighbors,” according to Garrison, “raises the stakes of the work considerably for the makers. They have more accountability” (11/20/2007). The desire for authenticity in producing and distributing documentary work is often the incentive for leading classes into more collaborative community media work. Identifying the goals (e.g., documenting history, people, and architecture) and identifying the “players” (the community group, the producers, and the filmmakers) are often the first steps for collaborative media projects.

Challenge 2: Content Control—Who’s in Charge?

The community and the filmmakers have different expectations regarding content and control.

Even after content discussions, resistance to

filmmaking may arise for a variety of reasons. Transitioning from a direct cinema approach to a more collaborative community approach implies changes in questions of content control. Garrison has worked in both ways with his students and the East Austin community. Early collaborative efforts started when high school English teacher Trent Sharp attended Garrison’s documentary production classes, and his high school students collaborated with Garrison’s college students.²² Several of these short films were successfully produced with the high school and college students and are now available on their Web site—EastAustinStories.org. For the majority of their collaborative efforts, though, Garrison’s undergraduates worked in more traditional documentary methods—with students completing all shooting and editing work. But finding stories in East Austin was accomplished only through multiple meetings with community members and community liaisons and through the arrangement of public screenings.

For the Bronzeville-Chicago films, content control was a more contentious issue because, in part, the collaboration was not primarily to produce a media project. The housing commissioner did not want the community’s high school students involved in helping to produce another “Public Housing, Part II” film, even though many of the students lived in the partially destroyed Ida B. Wells public housing development. The Bronzeville community had not, in the commissioner’s opinion, reaped any immediate benefits from the Wiseman experience—no material, physical, or substantial political benefits that the community could define. My undergraduates viewed Wiseman’s *Public Housing* before they were involved directly with the Bronzeville community, which contributed to their interest in the project and to their understanding of the community’s concerns about media representation. The Bronzeville community leaders spoke of the need for their children to tell their own stories, which would not, from their perspective, involve so much “negativity.”

Wiseman’s film offered an important

perspective for the students to view, and it allowed our university group to speak about longer-term historical truths, personal voice, different audience perspectives and experiences of place, and the political and historic benefits of Wiseman's distinctive storytelling style. Wiseman understands that conflict is dramatic and that it helps to generate interest from a broad audience for a subject, but perhaps not from every audience.²³ For these reasons and because of the community's prior experience with Wiseman, the Chicago university filmmakers decided to work more collaboratively with the community on content—by allowing the Bronzeville high school students to participate in choosing the stories to tell on camera.²⁴

In his documentary textbook, Alan Rosenthal describes several cases in which filmmakers run into conflict with their subjects because of a variety of misunderstandings related to interpersonal style and content control (191–92). Rosenthal recommends being “extremely sensitive to the moods” of subjects and community members in order to “anticipate and deflect growing resentment,” as well as being conscious that “the agenda of the participant or interviewee may be very different from yours” (192). The choice of allowing the Bronzeville community to participate more directly in storytelling had advantages and disadvantages for the final productions—clarity of story, timelines, technical quality, and editing choices were all compromised as a result, but other advantages were gained: the community allowed for direct access and eventually became more comfortable with addressing challenging material because a long-term commitment was demonstrated by the filmmakers. The Bronzeville high school students did, in fact, want to address issues of conflict on camera, but they wanted to have a role in choosing the conflicts that were covered. Ironically, once it became clear that the community's interests were being included in the documentary coverage, more content control and access were released back to the filmmakers.

Challenge 3: Filmmaking Is Easy

Everyone thinks they can do it. You just need to lend them your camera. Money is no problem. Neither is time.

These misperceptions may come from managers, social service leaders, or even university administrators, as much as from community members. Not every project will be appropriate for training in media and collaborative storytelling methods. It may be more appropriate to collaborate with the community on finding stories, setting up interviews, and organizing feedback screenings, as the East Austin Stories group has demonstrated. With the Stand Up! Help Out! project, the university students had to quickly make time for teaching storytelling and framing lessons (WS, ECU, establishing shots, etc.). They also began demonstrating logging, storyboarding, transcribing, editing, and some Web design to the high school students. The equipment demands and location challenges of most postproduction work resulted in the undergraduate filmmakers completing all editing and Web site construction.²⁵

Equipment and production training for communities, such as Bronzeville, are available only when college students and media instructors participate in collaborative media projects. The university group is limited usually more by time than by money or equipment. The community group does not have equipment, so they are dependent on others for it. One of the Chicago leaders, social worker Jeff Bulanda, described the high school students' lack of technical experience and personal “ownership” of equipment as a tension within the camp:

It would be ideal if [the youth] had video equipment of [their] own . . . the youth have not been able to be key players in putting together the documentary. In terms of technical stuff, we are all learning how to use the equipment and have learned the hard way about [the] difficulty of getting good sound, etc. . . . It is difficult to strike a balance between letting the teens do the taping and ensuring we are getting a high-quality product.²⁶

Time is one of the biggest challenges with producing stories collaboratively in the community, but an easy solution is, from the very beginning of a project, to plan for organizing outreach with the community—smaller, local screenings or educational components, such as the ones that Kartemquin, Video/Action, and Garrison emphasize. Only by continuing to develop a collaborative media project over several semesters with the same group of community members (but with different university students) have the university projects been able to develop to the point of completing several films within one semester. The challenges of not having enough time or access to equipment to complete collaborative media projects are overcome only through long-term commitments by faculty members and community leaders.

Challenge 4: Empathy versus Objectivity?

If you have too much empathy for your subject, and you “give away” too much content or equipment control, you will sacrifice objectivity and the overall quality and distribution of a piece.

Empathy for subject and objectivity are not in opposition to one another in most collaborative media or storytelling situations. Understanding how both areas are interconnected to issues of race, class, and history provides important learning opportunities for documentary students. Too often universities enroll communities of students who exist within fairly narrow parameters of difference—diversities of race and class are sometimes difficult to find on campus. Experiential learning and community

service work beyond the campus are important for these very reasons. Documentary fieldwork also accomplishes many of these goals. Without some form of collaboration, as Garrison points out, students do not get close enough to interesting stories or to “authentic” audiences. Spending time in East Austin or on the South Side of Chicago encourages college students to find stories in communities that may be underrepresented in mainstream media (or on their college campuses). Before we caution students against overly empathizing with their documentary subjects, instructors should make sure that students are first comfortable with interacting with communities of difference. Empathy may begin on campus, but finding stories, in general, takes time and should be considered an evolutionary process with the community.

Finding community liaisons or “fixers” is the first step to finding authentic stories and locations. Spending dedicated time with contact interviews and practicing in the field with equipment is the next step toward producing a quality product. Empathy results from a combination of research and listening—reading or viewing history, news items, films, or literature about a place and listening to music, to stories, and to people. For East Austin Stories, the initial project emerged from direct interactions with community members through “weekly meetings” hosted by a UT graduate student who then connected Garrison and his college students to potential subjects (11/18/2007). Teaching students how to access community liaisons, which may include social service workers, religious leaders, or educators, assists with building empathy, developing community trust and access, and identifying interview subjects



Photo 6: Gordon Quinn on set for *The New Americans* (Kartemquin, 2004).

and story elements. As Smith discovered in her Video/Action productions, working with social workers or other social service experts assists with an empathetic understanding of a community and its needs, as well as with a smoother production of the final product.

When I asked graduate student Bulanda if he thought that social workers should be trained in video, or documentary video workers trained in social work, this was his e-mail response:

Absolutely! . . . I think it is important to recognize people have different styles of learning and this is one way. I also think video is a way of empowering people to tell their stories.

I think documentary video workers could benefit from some aspects of social work. The first thing that comes to mind is basics of building rapport, developing empathy, using interview techniques. Then, having some psychological background in understanding why people act or respond the way they do I'm sure can be helpful. (7/28/2007)

Bulanda and social work colleague Angel Pringle spent time with Bronzeville students discussing (privately) conflict-resolution issues and histories of violence. None of this information was shared publicly with the filmmakers, but the social workers gained the trust of the students, who then felt more comfortable participating on camera with the filmmakers. Determining a balance between empathy and objectivity, between listening and providing "help," is an issue frequently confronted in collaborative media work, particularly with communities of difference. This does not mean that media instructors need to teach psychological or sociological empathy lessons in the classroom. Discussing different case studies with students and identifying community liaisons, though, are important strategies for preparing documentary students for fieldwork.

Challenge 5: Who Owns the Material?

In collaborative media projects, doesn't the community "own" part of the media project?

This challenge is connected to Challenge 2: who's in charge? Generally, whoever is "in charge" also claims ownership, in part or in whole, for the media project. But just as with university projects, studios or corporations are just another form of community. There are many pay scales within private studios, just as there are many different kinds of ownership within collaborative media projects.²⁷ Some of the unwritten benefits of collaborative documentary work include simply "help[ing] people know and understand each other better," as Dorothy Henaut of Canada's Challenge for Change program described (Barbash and Taylor 88). But individuals within communities can and should claim appropriate forms of "ownership" as facilitators, advisors, or coproducers or in additional camera roles or postproduction roles. Participants should reap a variety of benefits—from screening profits to tax write-offs, from donations to educational supplements, from press coverage to academic tenure. It is crucial to outline many of these potential benefits or goals at the outset, ideally in a written contract, just as it is crucial that filmmakers not make unreasonable promises about profits, grants, advocacy roles, or donations.

With the Video/Action, Kartemquin, East Austin Stories, and Stand Up! Help Out! documentary projects, a variety of benefits and strategies for collaborative work have been identified: for example, following up after initial media distribution with smaller, community screenings and discussions, providing the community with Web sites and server space, providing educational and supplemental materials, and donating DVD copies. As Aufderheide describes and Video/Action demonstrates, collaborative practices often lead to additional funding and new documentary opportunities. From Bulanda's social service perspective, a collaborative media project can also serve as a "transitional object"—something "tangible" that community members can keep, show to families, and use to represent their own relationship with storytelling (7/28/2007). Some of these values are difficult to quantify but are important to acknowledge at appropriate times.

Conclusion

Convergence and the more affordable costs of technology allow universities to place cameras and students into the community more frequently and with more choices. Helping students to develop their personal voice by working on strong storytelling and technical practices is just as challenging and time-consuming to teach as ever before. But it may also be important and worth the class time to cover some of the challenges and opportunities for media collaborations. Teaching students good listening and interviewing skills, showing them how to identify community liaisons and train production assistants, and helping them anticipate methods for community outreach while still producing a media product within a deadline all offer a new set of rewards in the classroom. Participating in authentic, collaborative experiences of gathering stories is a valuable learning opportunity for the twenty-first-century classroom.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.justin.tv>, which started with Justin Kan's "lifecasting" by wearing a webcam on his cap twenty-four hours per day; Mark Glaser, "Your Guide to Soldier Videos from Iraq," *MediaShift* (http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/08/digging_deeperyour_guide_to_so.html).

2. Jon Lewis does not see the "end of cinema" on the immediate horizon but rather "a transitional period from one new American cinema to another" (8). For these same reasons, I use the term "filmmaker" throughout this article. The present decade has demonstrated a transition in the materials for classical filmmaking, but at this point in time, the terms "film" and "filmmaker" refer to a storytelling tradition as well as to a history of training.

3. Michael Rabiger's documentary textbook does describe how the collaborative, "empathetic interviewer" leads to successful "authorship" in filmmaking. He acknowledges that "the interviewer's ability as a catalyst, selector and organizer remains written all over the screen" (331). See also Alan Rosenthal, *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*; Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films*.

4. Legal rights is an area related to content control that has received more attention. See Michael C.

Donaldson, *Clearance and Copyright: Everything the Independent Filmmaker Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Silman James, 2003. See also the online Fair Use resources at American University's Center for Social Media (<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org>).

5. See www.eastaustinstories.org; www.videoaction.org; www.kartemquin.com; www.stand-uphelpout.org.

Other interesting collaborative documentary filmmakers and distributors include the following: Niklas Vollmer, Georgia State University; Jeff Spitz, Columbia College Chicago; Sheila Schroeder, University of Denver; Toni Perrine, Grand Valley State University; Russell Porter, Columbia College Chicago and ICAIC; Alliance for Community Media; Tom Weinburg, Media Burn Independent Video Archive (<http://www.media-burn.org>).

6. Academic classrooms are starting to offer or require "civic engagement" experiences and "experiential learning"—buzzwords that suggest the pedagogical importance of having students interact more directly with the communities that extend beyond the campus. See Farrell, "A Civics Lesson," and John Kitterman, "Walden on the Blue Ridge," which both appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

7. David Stewart published this interview as Fred Wiseman's thirtieth film, *Public Housing*, was about to broadcast on PBS in 1998.

8. Jean Rouch on the filmmaker as ethnographer:

These critical reflections on the self of the filmmaker lead me to expand on the concept of the self of the ethnographer. In the field, the observer modifies himself; in doing his work, he is no longer simply someone who greets the elders at the edge of the village, but-to go back to Vertovian terminology—he ethno-looks, ethno-observes, ethno-thinks. And those with whom he deals are similarly modified; in giving their confidence to this habitual foreign visitor, they ethno-show, ethno-speak, ethno-think. It is this permanent ethno-dialogue that appears to be one of the most interesting angles in the current progress of ethnography . . . it is the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and those whom they study meet on a path that some of us now call "shared anthropology." (Feld 100)

9. This issue of follow-up and content repercussions is discussed further with my own collaborative shooting example at the Ida B. Wells housing development in summer 2006.

10. See Video Data Bank's history of TVTV (<http://www.vdb.org>) and the MediaBurn Video Archive (<http://www.mediaburn.org>).

11. See <http://www.filmmaid.org>.

12. "Video/Action collaborates with educators, activists, and artists to produce television programs and imaginative training videos. We specialize in working

with individuals and organizations with great stories to share, but limited experience in professional video production. Together we create high-quality media presentations that capture what is unique and special about the work they do.” See <http://www.videoaction.org>

13. Active Voice originated with P.O.V. producer Ellen Schneider and the desire by “media strategists, diversity trainers and facilitators to refine a sustainable model for linking social issue documentaries with community and national organizations” (<http://www.activevoice.net/about.html>).

14. Active Voice has implemented a targeted national campaign around *The New Americans* series, which resulted in community partners who “customized” their use of the video in a variety of ways: “some engaged elected officials, others held press conferences to announce new coalitions, still others launched year-long statewide initiatives to pave the way for ‘receiving’ immigrants more effectively. When the participants identified particularly helpful scenes, we edited them into VHS and DVD modules and provided Discussion Guides that guided them in using the material” (http://www.activevoice.net/new_americans.html).

15. The Dayton Community Media Workshop included two pioneering independent filmmakers, Jim Klein and Julia Reichert. Other members of this political media collective included Ellen Schneider, founder of *Active Voice*; Kim Aubry, producer of *Apocalypse Now Redux*; and Carol Greenwald, producer of the *Arthur* series on PBS.

16. Dee Dee Halleck provides detailed anecdotes about this early US community media work, much of which also involved the political goals of the public access movement—to establish FCC regulatory rules for free media training and distribution.

17. The goals of community media supplemented, but were also seen as separate from, the goals of the government-sponsored public media system for a variety of reasons, which were distinctly different when comparing European public media systems to US public broadcasting. Much of this early US community media and independent television work is preserved and documented at various universities, such as New York University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, the School of the Art Institute, the Video Data Bank, and the Whitney Museum, and is also available on Web sites, such as FITV’s <http://www.mediaburn.org>.

18. “U.T. students—usually beginning production students, but sometimes an advanced class, and often including grads from other programs or guests auditing—find stories in East Austin through direct contact, through newspaper and other media, and by talking to class guests. Their assignment is to bring that story to video as a 5–7 minute piece, which we will show in public screenings in East Aus-

tin at the community hall of *Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church* and in the courtyard of the independent cafe, *Cafe Mundi*. Since 2003, I have also been streaming them on a Website, and since 2006, we have started podcasting them” (Garrison e-mail, 11/20/2007).

19. The housing council administrators expressed concern over Loyola faculty and students pursuing documentary work that did not foreground more “positive” aspects of their housing community. They did not want another “Wiseman-like” portrayal of their neighborhoods. Loyola instructors, who had shown their college students Wiseman’s film, *Public Housing* (1997), before the collaborative work began with the community, quickly revised their documentary plans for getting the Loyola undergraduates to document the Ida B. Wells living spaces and the buildings that were being torn down and instead focused more directly on the community’s goals for collaborating with the Loyola University community.

20. After School Matters (ASM) is a program started by Maggie Daley, wife of Chicago mayor Richard Daley, in which the students are paid “salaries” for attending after-school and summer programs. From one perspective, the kids are being paid to “stay out of trouble.” From another perspective, the city is funding artists, teachers, social workers, and filmmakers to train kids in all sorts of areas—puppetry, filmmaking, cooking, social work, and carpentry, for example. The program is widely praised for achieving its goals. See <http://www.afterschoolmatters.org>.

21. The ASM campers selected the film and Web title of *Stand Up! Help Out!* as well as the color scheme, music, and photographs; they also conducted interviews, provided voiceovers, and wrote their own biographies. LUC students and faculty added the coding and provided editing of materials. Story content for films was determined by the collaboratively approved community “theme” for each camp.

22. *Piercing* and *My Cultura* are short films coproduced with Sharp’s high school students and are available at <http://www.eastaustinstories.org> and on iTunes. Pieces about the Reagan high school students produced by UT, Austin, college students include “Generation Digital,” “For Me and Him,” “5.6.7.8: A Story of Reagan High School Dance Team,” and “Raider P.E.P.”

23. Wiseman was interviewed by filmmaker Gerald Peary in *The Boston Phoenix* about *Public Housing*. Peary asked Wiseman whether “he looked for ‘drama’ while shooting.” Wiseman responded, “A movie has to have dramatic sequences and structure. . . . So yes, I am looking for drama, though I’m not necessarily looking for people beating each other up, shooting each other. There’s a lot of drama in ordinary experiences” (Bernard 37).

24. Stories were chosen via the thematic lens of

the After School Matters camps. Each camp focused on different social service themes—public health, safety, and education—which is why they were led by social work graduate students. Documentary elements developed from the camp materials, from camp experiences, and from the experts who were brought into the ASM camps—for example, organizing community health fairs and a march against violence, visiting universities or tutoring elementary children, and talking with journalists, such as Laura Washington, Ida B. Wells Professor at De Paul University, and educators, such as Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools.

25. The LUC/After School leaders had their high school students meet with another After School Matters program in Chicago that was focused on radio documentary work. The students exchanged anecdotal experiences with each other—“How close do you have to get the mike?” and “We have to transcribe the whole tape. . . .”

26. Bulanda also expressed what Barbash and Taylor identified as happening in ethnographic documentaries—the “expert” and the filmmakers start to confuse their roles and must redefine them. Barbash and Taylor acknowledge that “it may be just as frustrating for anthropologists if filmmakers act as nouveaux ethnographers” and vice versa (81). Ideally, each participant shares a reasonable amount of knowledge.

27. Barbash and Taylor detail Ash’s contractual recommendations for ethnographic filmmaking, which include defining the goals of the project and outlining footage, credits and distribution, responsibilities and time commitments of both parties, and financial responsibilities (85). The Center for Social Media, American University, lists distribution outlets for social media documentaries and includes pertinent discussions of fair use, copyright laws, and ownership on their Web site. See <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org>.

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