DEVELOPING DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES FOR FILM STUDENTS

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Abstract
Documentaries are considered a form of filmmaking that is unique because it allows for a common person (the filmmaker cum student) to address large, important issues that is able to shake society. It involves a small portion of power as it addresses a wide range of subject matters such as history, anthropology, and trends, as well as, social and political constructs, ethical issues and moral responsibilities. However, even though documentaries have evolved continuously, its approaches and methods remain ambiguous, and its parameters keep enlarging and changing. As students starting out to understand the process of documentary filmmaking, many struggle in terms of identifying appropriate content suited for that of a documentary. This research seeks out suitable idea and story identification techniques, such as through the use of strategic mapping, as a means of helping students to understand the layers required in planning a documentary content. Action research is applied to guide and observe students' responses through a number of mapping techniques that allows for the identification of the core focus/theme of the documentary. The research discovers students' ability to develop and change their first impression responses as they gradually understand the process and the content needed.

Keywords: documentaries, stories, strategic mapping

Introduction

Feature film documentaries are unique as it allows for the opportunity of addressing issues that affect society. In comparison to the (fictional) feature film that one often watches in the cinema, documentary feature films are a mired combination of fact and fiction as facts are told in an interesting and different way. As technology advances there is now a blur between fact and fiction as storytelling becomes more mature and advanced in their approaches and techniques. Nevertheless, while filmmaking techniques may change, the priority on being able to identify and tell suitable documentary stories remain. Importance remains on the content or stories that are to be told. As Rabiger (2014) states, even though documentaries have evolved continuously, its approaches and methods remain ambiguous, and its parameters keep enlarging and changing. Hence, the purpose of this study is to identify and develop students' abilities in coming up and proposing documentary story ideas that can be made into feature length documentaries.

Documentaries are organized stories, "Our stories depend not on creative invention but on creative arrangement…" (Bernard, 2007). Stories contain engaging characters, narrative tension, and an integrated point of view. These elements are fundamental to all stories, and are present in man's earliest organized narratives such as legends and folk tales.Stories can also be found in contemporary and real time information/situations such as that in the local newspapers, in the news, from online blogs, as well as on social media (*Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*) owned by celebrities and political leaders, though this is not the focus of this study. There is a need and a drive to keep an eye out and be aware for bits of information that has the potential of becoming an interesting story. Curiosity is key and asking critical questions regarding a story allows for the ability of finding stories that students can tell. Therefore, as Bernard emphasises, "A story may begin as an idea, hypothesis, or [a] series of questions." And, "A good documentary confounds our expectations, pushes boundaries, and takes us into worlds–both literal worlds and worlds of ideas–that we did not anticipate entering." In being able to mobilize a range of strong feelings towards a potential documentary story, it urges us into action. All successful documentary stories centre on some aspect of human development no matter how minimal or symbolic, and documentaries do this in order to leave us with some degree of hope. Examples of such documentaries are, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011), *The Act of Killing*(2012),*Blackfish*(2013),*I Am Not Your Negro*(2016),to name a few.

As film students start out to understand the process of documentary filmmaking and storytelling, many students struggle in terms of identifying appropriate content suited for that of a documentary. According to Dovey and Rose (2013), "…there are also some forms emerging that point to major new developments for documentary as the new century gets into stride. Media production platforms have different affordances that offer different possible processes of production, different cultural forms and genres, and different audience or user experience." This overwhelming amount of change within the filmmaking ecosystem itself is daunting enough, much more so for the budding filmmaker. As a starting point, looking for appropriate documentary ideas that can be potentially developed into strong and good documentaries is a challenging, yet fulfilling process. Film/documentary students struggle in efforts to identify, select and determine suitable subject matters that through research can be developed into good documentaries. In addition, students also find it difficult to determine appropriate strategies in overcoming this problem. Therefore, a number of questions arise: What strategies can be employed to identify, select and develop suitable content for documentaries? Does the

mapping/breaking down technique provide a suitable approach in assisting students to identify, select and develop suitable documentary content?

The aims of this research is to thus, identify appropriate strategies in obtaining and generating documentary story ideas; develop these storytelling techniques to formulate documentaries; and, to suggest techniques in identifying, selecting and developing identified content for these documentaries. The significance of this research is its ability to provide filmmaking students with appropriate strategies in identifying documentary story ideas. The scope of the research is on university filmmaking students who attend a documentary writing class. It is however, limited to a group of students from two semesters, and does not address a broader sampling at this stage.

Background of research

Work by Natusch and Hawkins (2014) explores the manner in which Bill Nichols' concept of 'modes' can be applied to the analysis of two forms of documentaries. They suggest that while Nichols proposes the modes on a macro level, it is also applicable to that at the micro level through the use of in-depth scene-by-scene analysis. This is one strategy in efforts to identify and analyze the content of a documentary. However, Natusch and Hawkins take an empirical approach towards the process of evaluating documentary content, in which a microanalysis was conducted on the modes based on two different documentary films.

Dovey and Rose (2013) on the other hand, attempt to identify various forms of the documentary in context with the development of the internet. They explore the different platforms available that allows for documentaries to be distributed to a wider viewership. The nature in which the visual platform of presentation differs also suggests the manner in which documentary subject matters are introduced to the public. Identifying appropriate content determines viewership in which the work of Dovey and Rose propose new modes of documentary-making that is participatory.

In comparison, research by Uricchio (2014) proposes several considerations in preparing documentaries for the digital age. These considerations include the user's experience, understanding and behavior, the ability to allow the story to determine its form, the use of experiments as a process of learning, cross border collaborations, interactive conversation and participation as well as the use of archives creatively in consideration of the long term impact of the content. Uricchio presents a strong construct of approaches in developing the overall process of documentary making.

However, in a monograph by Das (2007), she explains approaches to which documentary scripts are to be written. The core of her approach is research in terms of developing strong, good and credible documentaries. These are approaches that budding documentary filmmakers need to understand and apply in their journey to developing good content. The literature addressed suggest various approaches that can be used in efforts to develop and enhance student content seeking techniques in identifying and selecting suitable stories for documentaries. These strategies through various stages can lead to a more constructive and well-formed documentary.

Mind-mapping is considered an easy and approachable method of starting off in terms of looking for a documentary idea. Demonstration of past work of similar strategies/approach is found and shared in

work by Parker (2014). Her first strategy/approach is to gather the first draft of ideas based on an initial mind-map and an identification of key words. This is followed by a listing of words associated to the key words. The key words identified bring about various suggestions of idea development that bring forth the possible angle or perspective that the documentary would or could focus on. Next would be the narrowing down process as the ideas initially identified are given further consideration and thought as to the best topic in terms of subject of interest. In which, the selected idea, is drafted into a short paragraph encompassing an introduction/overview of the subject matter, its purpose and its focus. Once there is a clear idea of each subject matter, the idea with the most potential and interest is selected.

While, Parker demonstrates the approach, this research takes an extended, in-depth critical perspective of the strategy. In this research, a critical descriptive analysis of the techniques is discussed to evaluate the process and its potential.

Methodology

The research is interpretive in nature; therefore, action research is applied. As Collins (2010) identifies, "Action research: data is collected in collaboration with research participants, or by the participants themselves, to bring about direct and immediate practical change in their social context". As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the research was to identify and develop documentary storytelling ideas among film students. Action research allows for direct collaboration and participation of these students in efforts to identify appropriate techniques. The research extends its process to also include, as explained by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) (in Collins, 2010),

> "… a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practice… and the situations in which these practices are carried out… The approach is only action research when it is collaborative [and relies upon] the critically examined action of individual group members."

Therefore, the strategy applied to this process is as follows:

Table 1: Strategy of action research process

Paradigm	Type of Research	Methodology	Techniques	Unit of Analysis
Action (inductive, qualitative)	Exploratory	Exploratory Action research (action and theory-result of research aimed at change)	Participation	Documentary film students

Diagram 2: Action Research (source: ARGEF website (2016))

There are four (4) basic steps in the action research cycle – plan, act, observe/collect data, reflect/review. It is a form of inquiry conducted by researchers who wish to inform and improve their practice, their understanding, and decision making in their practice, as well as gauge the effect of their practice on the research. The following is a summary of the research process applied:

Table 2: Summary of the action research process

Phase / Steps	Issue(s)/Action(s)/Findings
Early Reflection – What are the problems which occur?	Students struggled in identifying appropriate story ideas/themes/concepts
Focus of research	To develop strategies in identifying story ideas
Research objectives	• To identify strategies for story/storytelling ideas • To develop strategies for story/storytelling ideas
Research Design	**Action Research**
Plan	• Duration –two (2) semesters • Group sample – two (2) groups • Students were informed as to the purpose of the research
Act	• Act 1: Students were required to draw mind maps of possible documentary stories • Act 2: Students were to transfer/extend ideas beyond the mind map into a three-column grid
Observe/Observation	Result of Act 1: Students easily drew mind maps based on first impressions/thoughts/ideas Result of Act 2: Students took more time to re-evaluate their actions in Act 1, to reconsider their responses, and to generate better responses that were not based on first impressions

Research Findings	Students were able to identify and develop better story/storytelling ideas The story/storytelling ideas were better composed, structured and organized. The ideas were thought through and re-considered/re-evaluated prior to giving/providing a final idea
Reflect/Reflections	The actions taken were effective in identifying students thought processes in coming up with story ideas. This is because first impression and initial response is important in sorting out thoughts/ideas of potential for further development. The strengths of the actions are in its ability to assess students' capability of generating and managing ideas. It is important for students to know the potential of a given idea. The weaknesses of the actions are in its ability to ensure consistency among the students for future idea-generating projects. Repeat of action will develop and encourage consistency within the students. While the actions are effective, in time, it can be refined in its process and execution.

Results and Discussion

The research was conducted on two (2) documentary writing classes, over the duration of two (2) semesters. The number of students who participated in the study was 162 respectively. Prior to the execution of the actions, ten (10) documentary feature films were screened to the students.

With reference to Action 1, after the screening of the documentaries, students were asked to verbally respond in the form of one-word first impressions/one-word first response. Students' key word identification was mapped onto the board. The students were then tasked to draw a mind map, by writing key words as to what were the important components of the documentaries. They were tasked to associate the main idea/theme of the film with a single word that they believed was reflected by the story. For example, after *Super Size Me* was screened, students first response was 'food', or after *March of the Penguins*, the first response was 'survival'.

Students successfully drew first impression mind maps in response to generating initial ideas. Action 1 then tasked the students by asking them to extend their mind maps beyond their first impressions, and to associate their initial ideas with other possible words that were important to the film. Students were required to re-design their mind map into a 3-column frame. Students then identified key words that are unique/different. A new set of words are mapped during Phase II. After which, students identify and select the possible key word that they would like to explain in terms of creating a new documentary or a new story. The following is an example of the task:

Table 3: Example of the strategic mapping of student's response

Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
First word impression / response	Second extended word / impression / idea	Third extended word / impression / idea
March of the Penguins Survival Love Family Life Death Migration Danger Hope Hardship	Relationship Importance Priority Circle of Life	A New Day

Students' ability in identifying and extending key words allowed for the selection of extended ideas that can be developed into potential documentaries. Students are to build on the new idea as a means of pitching and later writing and developing a documentary script. Further constructive discussion and feedback takes place to allow students to argue and debate their views, opinions as well as their responses as a means of formulating a good documentary story idea. Nevertheless, it is however noted that this method/strategy may not be the only method that is capable of developing students' documentary story/ideas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the outcome of this research puts together one method of students applying the mind-mapping approach towards a more strategic mapping technique. The strategic mapping identified allows a more structured evaluation of the possibility/potential of the story ideas. The mapping strategies allows for a more comprehensive analysis of documentaries and documentary ideas. The first layer of story does not reflect the essence of the story or its core theme. Efforts need to be put in place to seek out the core meaning of the stories. Each mapping strategy/extension brings a fresh, special, and engrossing involvement with some aspect of the human condition. The students need to have a passion and empathy in their engagement with the subject matter to ensure their commitment in creating new stories for the big screen.

The results of this research can be extended in the teaching and learning of documentary filmmaking or writing as a method of refining strategies towards generating new documentary ideas. The strategy forces students to break-away from the norm of mind mapping to calculatedly plan and organise their ideas in order to develop suitable techniques of determining suitable documentary content. This strategy enhances the type of documentary stories told as well as allows for the students to visually plan and structure the content of their documentary idea. This effort also enhances the quality of the ideas identified for documentary making through research strategies that they apply in efforts to enhance their understanding of its approaches. Hence, students develop stronger skills in identifying

appropriate story ideas and themes. The types of documentary stories told and identified by the students allows for strong visual conceptualisation of the story whichsimultaneouslyenhancing their understanding of documentary storytelling.

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