

The Artful Interview in Documentary Production

by Carol Spellman

For seven years, the Oregon Historical Society Folklife Program staff taught youth video production skills to document their communities' cultural practices. Youth in both rural and urban locations created 45 short documentaries; received awards; and learned interpersonal, intercultural, intergenerational, organizational, and technological skills that they will carry with them through life. In making documentary videos, youth learn to conduct background research, communicate with people from many walks of life, design questionnaires, conduct interviews, work collaboratively, and shoot and edit video.

Memorable documentaries tell compelling stories, and interviews are the keystones for great stories that encourage us to think, feel, interact, or take action. Through interviews 4th through 12th graders often have “ah-ha” experiences about what they know, don’t know, and can learn about this art.

Artful interviewing requires flexibility, curiosity, inquiry, ease with people, dogged determination to pursue the hard questions, active listening, empathy, and the ability to comprehend quickly what questions will elicit interesting stories.

How do we assist youth in learning how to “artfully interview?” What are the special decisions required when using video as the medium?

Listening Activities

Before sending students out into the community to video record interviews, give them opportunities to hone their skills with the following activities.

1. **Paired Listening.** Have students bring in an object to share. Ask them to pair up and share their stories about the items. The interviewer cannot take notes, must actively listen, and can ask three questions to clarify missing information. Each interviewer then introduces the partner to the class based on what s/he gleaned from the shared object story. Debrief and discuss ways that each person demonstrated active listening.

2. **Video Mock Interviews.** Begin using the camera to practice recording interviews. Assign teams of four or five students (one to operate the camera, one to operate a second camera for close-ups and extreme close-ups, one to interview, and one or two to be interviewed). Choose an activity to film such as a salsa tasting contest or a mock visit to a store to interview the “store manager.” Provide props for the “store manager” to tell about. Review the footage with youth for what works and what doesn’t in both the interview and the filming of visuals as seen through the eye of the lens.

3. **Practice Interviews with Guests.** After adequate practice, invite a guest to the class to be interviewed (traditional artist, musician, local community member, or elder). Have youth conduct the interview in a professional manner. Debrief.

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Skills for Teaching Video Production

On the first day of a video project, provide hands-on experience with equipment. Exploration engages youth and allows them time to discover how the equipment works, including camera, batteries, tripod, external microphones, lighting, types of shots (wide shot, medium shot, close up, extreme close-up).

Explore various crew roles including interviewer, camera operator, sound person, note taker, still photographer, editor, etc. Knowing all roles provides a back-up if someone is ill, adds a variety of perspectives, and offers more brains to “brainstorm” ideas and solutions.

View documentaries. Discuss how interviews, visuals, and editing styles and decisions contribute to telling the stories.

Divide youth into small collaborative teams as they use equipment. They will discover what crew role(s) they feel most confident with and what roles they need to learn more about.

Video equipment is expensive, so it is important to discuss proper handling to avoid accidents or damage.

Each student films one to two minutes of footage inside or outside the classroom. Include setting up the camera, dealing with background sounds, ambient sounds (wind, rain, etc.), natural vs. non-natural lighting, filming a variety of shots.

Artful Interviewing

Plan the interview and shoot with the final product in mind. Prepare youth for the “big interviews” they will conduct with community members. Using video requires that certain decisions be made. Will the interviewer be on camera with the interviewee in a two-shot, three-shot, over-the-shoulder, or person-on-the-street interview? What is the best way to set up external microphones to ensure audible sound? Will the interviewer be off camera (one-shot) in either a formal or informal interview? If the interviewer’s questions are not to be included in the video, it is important for the interviewee to rephrase the question as a part of the response.

Practice good interview manners. Discuss the importance of treating interview subjects with respect. This may require a discussion of culturally sensitive issues. Have students demonstrate rude behaviors (chewing gum, arguing with interviewees, tardiness, looking at notes during the entire interview rather than at the person being interviewed, etc.) and discuss why these may hamper rapport and information exchange.

Plan questions. Interviewers should come to an interview prepared with questions based on background research, but they also will need to exercise flexibility, curiosity, fast thinking, and active listening! Has enough background information been researched to generate a list of questions and do interviewers have the confidence to ask educated questions not on their list? Review the list of questions and ask, “Are the essential questions being asked?” The surprising, sad, poignant, or hilarious moments in documentary stories are often uncovered when interviewers ask follow-up questions.

Practice active listening. Active listening promotes an atmosphere of rapport and respect. It involves body language (facial expressions, leaning forward, eye contact), listening without interrupting, paraphrasing, allowing interviewees time to respond before jumping in with the next question, intense listening, and sometimes laughter, tears, etc., which may have to be communicated “silently” when the interviewer is not shown on camera. Active listening engages interviewees as part of the process and values their contributions. It is an essential ingredient for getting great stories in an interview.

Teaching youth the language of video production to document community stories using interviews is empowering, emerging, enlightening, and exhausting! One team’s film about a neighborhood restaurant and its legendary enchiladas illustrates the value of video interviews for youth. After viewing the footage of his team’s community interviews, Arturo, the team’s camera operator, wrote an introductory rap for the video:

*I rep my block in the 503
From North Portland to my community
Never would have known there was so much to see
That builds our culture’s identity
Until I started to film all about the folklife realm. . . .*



Carol Spellman, an independent folklorist and educator, worked throughout Oregon with folk arts community organizations and public and private schools. She died January 26, 2017, in Portland, Oregon. Her exuberance and work in the field are missed.

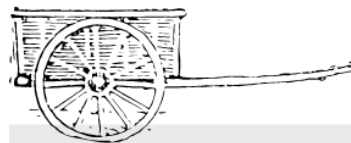
Carol and students at Owyhee Combined School locate Australia on a map during a National Cowboy Poetry Gathering outreach performance by bush poet Milton Taylor.

Photo by Jessica Brandi Lifland, courtesy of Western Folklife Center.

From Our Archives . . . A Special Reprint!

This is the first of what may become a tradition of sharing noteworthy Folklore and Education materials that are out of print or were only available through small distribution channels. Resources that continue to have significance for today’s audiences will be considered for publication. Contact *Journal of Folklore and Education* editors to suggest your favorite resources for republication.

~ Your Editors



C.A.R.T.S.

CULTURAL ARTS RESOURCES
FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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