Classroom Connections: Curriculum Structure and Takeaways for Educators

CDW unfolds over 16 weeks, with a combination of full-day intensive workshops and shorter evening sessions. This extended timeframe allows for relationship building, skill development, and meaningful documentation work while accommodating participants' existing commitments. The entire process, however, begins months earlier with outreach, community partner selection, and preliminary planning.

CDW Timeline and Session Topics
Meetings are typically 2 weeks apart.
- At least 3 months prior: Outreach to potential public and student volunteers, solidifying plans with community partners, purchasing and updating equipment
- 1st session: Full-day intensive with ice breakers, interviewing, discussion of visual language, previous project presentations
- 2nd: Hands-on DSLR camera and audio equipment training, discussion of framing interviews, background lighting and sound, B-roll
- 3rd: Digital editing software training in the computer lab, each participant learning to combine video and audio sources to produce the same composite video of a rocket launch
- 4th: A second day-long intensive meeting covering footage review, photo albums, transcription, working with archives
- 5th: Storytelling and working with footage, creating paper edits
- 6th: Reviewing paper edits
- 7th: Rough cut screenings
- 8th: Premiere of videos, exit interviews, and debriefing with participants
- 3-6 months later: A second "final" screening of the videos, as well as smaller screenings with each participant organization

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Building Skills and Reflection from Day One

Our first day is a full day, a weekend meeting from morning till afternoon. Participants introduce themselves, explaining their roles as facilitators or their interest in the program as public volunteers, and their connections to local cultural communities. During this round of introductions, the community scholars present their ideas about the project they hope to film with their communities. Next, we invite participants to get to know more about each other through taking turns at interviewing and being interviewed.

We want to build both skills and rapport right from the start. Using a modified version of Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's "Reading an Object" interview prompt (2012, 125), participants present objects to each other—something that reflects some aspect of their identity. As they develop questions to ask one another, these early interview activities invite reflexivity about what it feels like to *be* interviewed—to have someone ask you questions about cultural practice and identity. Our debrief afterward includes discussion of the art of interviewing as well as how it feels to be described, narrated, questioned, transcribed, and observed. We see this process as a crucial step in developing empathy for interviewing people—whether they are of the community we identify with or not.

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Later that day we spend time deciphering some of the visual language strategies common in documentary video, including lighting and framing techniques. We spend time going through how close-ups, medium-shots, and wide-shots can illustrate various aspects of a story. For example, wide-shots are often used to tell a viewer where the story takes place; medium-shots show action—people doing things; close-ups show people's emotions or details of objects. Here we also discuss the relationship between interview voiceovers and observational footage (also known as B-roll), and how the two can complement one another to create complex meanings.

The Photo Album Assignment: Learning Visual Storytelling
This discussion forms the basis of a second reflexive assignment. Workshop participants create a photo album that tells their fellow participants about their home using ten images they either create specifically for the assignment or have taken themselves in the past and then caption the photos using three to five sentences each. Participants review each other's photo albums, comment, and ask questions about what is intentionally in the frame, what perhaps creeps into frame, and what exists beyond the frame.

There are multiple goals for this assignment: getting participants to tell a story using a variety of image types (wide- medium- and close- shots), exploring the complex way images and texts complement one another to tell rich stories, and inviting empathetic reflection about the vulnerable nature of sharing personal aspects of cultural identity in public spaces. What stories do we choose to tell? How do we decide what goes in and what is left out?

One year T.C. created a photo album about how he fly fishes in his neighborhood and how that relates to his immediate family as well as the community in Ithaca. Another year his photo album focused on the centrality of music in his family and friend circles. The images were of guitars and photos of friends, including an altar to a deceased friend and former bandmate and roommate—all found within his home office. One participant included various photos of his home in the midst of renovations as he prepared for the arrival of his first child. Another included a photo of the stack of books she had read as a member of a book club and her personal journals chronicling three decades. Another titled her photo album "Home is many places… and the intensity of my connection to each place ebbs and flows." A photo of potatoes harvested from her home garden was accompanied by the caption:

Potatoes!!!!

We grow a lot of our own food and this is a small part of my recent potato harvest. Digging potatoes is one of my favorite and comforting gardening tasks. It's like a treasure hunt! You dig in the dirt and then suddenly find a big delicious potato!

The knowledge of how to grow, prepare, and preserve food is both crucial and disappearing. Maintaining and teaching about these traditions in my community is an important part of who I am and what I believe.

These stories that we tell in a group—artfully and with intention in a documentary style—often create many forms of connection among the cohort. They may raise issues about where people struggle to share certain elements of their identity, but they also illustrate strategies that

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participants can employ when they are out "in the field" documenting tradition bearers or community events. Representing oneself, and one's community, and learning to ask questions of each other in a respectful manner, are crucial ethnographic skills that come before the myriad technical considerations that arise in the CDW process.

Technical Training and Equipment Considerations
While these reflective exercises build essential ethnographic sensibilities, participants also need concrete technical skills to create their documentaries. We frontload technical training in DSLR cameras, audio recorders, and editing software. The Steele Memorial Library in downtown Elmira is our homebase for the duration of the workshops, and their MakerSpace and Digital Media Lab house the workshops, equipment, and computers with editing software.

While a documentation project could be accomplished with smartphones and various adapters these days, we find the most equitable approach is to invest in high-quality equipment. The Steele Memorial Library provides editing stations and broadband internet, and a sizable portion of our grant funding was initially devoted to purchasing standardized sets of equipment—cameras, recorders, microphones, lighting kits, and hard drives. By training everyone on the same equipment, having a tested workflow for how to preserve and edit footage, and ensuring that participants all know how to use the cameras, recorders, and editing software, we can ensure that no one is left behind. Furthermore, CDW facilitators are all also trained on the equipment, and can troubleshoot issues. Every technical skill learned on borrowed equipment can be transferred to one's own camera or smartphone and editing software of a participant's choice at a later date. CDW provides participants with experience using higher quality tools and demonstrates their value; some participants and partner organizations have gone on to invest in their own kits to continue documentation after the conclusion of the workshops.
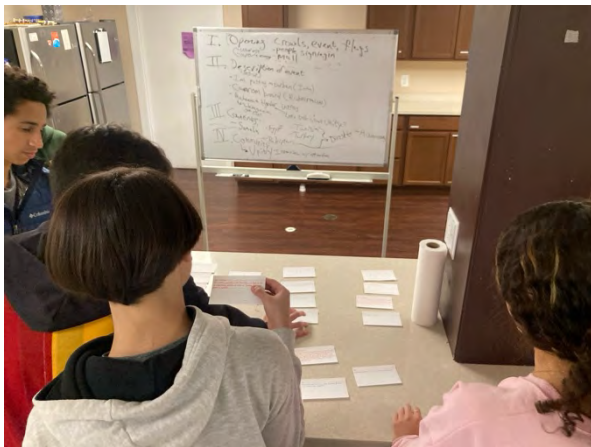
Young people from the Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes create a paper edit for their video project, using an outline on a dry erase board and note cards with interview quotes prior to editing their video project on a computer. Photo by T.C. Owens.

Paper Edit: A Critical Learning Tool
One of the most valuable components of the curriculum is the paper edit. Teams develop a written outline of their video before beginning the technical editing process on computers. This involves listing and organizing interview transcripts, identifying key quotes, planning B-roll sequences, and structuring the narrative of the final piece to tell the story they want to share. One participant described the paper edit as both a plan for building her video and a map for seeing where the pieces could be found. The paper edit process teaches critical thinking, narrative construction, and collaboration. Teams negotiate which parts of interviews to highlight, how to structure their story, and what additional visual elements they need to gather. It is not lost on participants that this process often leads to insights that they can apply beyond documentary work—in their writing, professional communication, and other creative endeavors.

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Recommendations

For those interested in developing similar programs, we offer several recommendations based on our experience.

Program Structure

- **Establish Clear Partnerships** CDW's success relies on strong institutional partnerships that bring different resources and expertise to the table. Each partner should have clear roles and contributions.
- **Equipment Budget** While it's possible to create videos with smartphones, having consistent, professional-quality equipment removes technical barriers and disparities among participants.
- **Adequate Time** The extended timeline (14-16 weeks) allows for relationship building and skills development. Consider the rhythm of your community when planning session frequency.
- **Pay Community Scholars** Stipends for community scholars acknowledge the expertise and time they contribute. This is both practically supportive and symbolically important in valuing community knowledge.

Pedagogical Approaches

- **Start with Reflexivity** Before documenting others, participants should experience being documented themselves. This builds empathy and awareness of power dynamics.
- **Scaffold Technical Skills** Introduce equipment and software gradually, with plenty of hands-on practice. Focus on the minimum necessary skills before adding complexity.
- **Use the Paper Edit** The paper edit process is valuable for video production and teaching storytelling, critical thinking, and collaborative decision making.
- **Balance Structure and Flexibility** Provide clear frameworks and deadlines but allow room for teams to adapt to their specific community contexts and needs.

Team Building

- **Mix Insider/Outsider Perspectives** Deliberately create teams that combine community insiders with interested outsiders for richer documentation.
- **Build in Assessment Tools** Regular check-ins and adjustments keep teams on track. Create opportunities for evaluation and feedback throughout the process.
- **Value Different Skills** Recognize that teams need various strengths—technical skills, interviewing abilities, storytelling talent, and cultural knowledge.

Community Engagement

- **Start Relationship Building Early** Begin discussions with potential community partners months before the workshop begins.
- **Let Communities Define Their Stories** While facilitators may provide guidance on technical aspects, the content should be driven by what the community values and wishes to document.
- **Create Multiple Sharing Opportunities** Plan for both the initial screening and additional venues where the documentaries can continue to have impact.
- **Document the Documentation** Document and keep records of the process, including participant feedback, to inform future iterations.

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