



Collaborative Ethnography: The Community Documentation Workshop Model

by T.C. Owens and Doc M. Billingsley

I had no experience in any sort of documentary filmmaking, and I was worried the process would be intense or heavily academic—the sort of thing you need a sociology degree to fully understand. Everything fell into place pretty quickly, though. The explanations on how the different processes were completed, such as camera operation, interview protocol, and transcription were easy to follow—both thorough and accessible. It also helped that we spent a while explaining the methodology of what we were doing and why, such as “This is how you ethically conduct an interview” and “This is why local traditions are worth preserving.”

—Jessa Barton, 2023 Community Documentation Workshop participant

About the photo: Haudenosaunee potter Peter B. Jones places pots in a fire while Jocelyn J. Jones documents. Photo by T.C. Owens.

As Jessa Barton's reflection illustrates, the Community Documentation Workshop makes ethnographic methods more widely accessible to community members of various backgrounds. The success of the workshop is rooted in reciprocity, collaborative engagement, the slow work of accountable relationship building, a commitment to supporting projects beyond their completion, and a curriculum that has enough structure to be durable but is flexible enough to adapt to the needs and goals of everyday people and the communities they live in. The Community Documentation Workshop (CDW) in New York's Southern Finger Lakes region is a collaborative ethnographic project bringing together teams of local community scholars, culture workers, arts professionals, and residents interested in learning about ways to preserve and share their traditions through documentary ethnography and short-form video production. What distinguishes CDW is its structured team-based approach, sustained community scholar engagement, and emphasis on reciprocal learning between cultural insiders and outsiders. CDW documentary videos share our region's cultural diversity with a wider public, while the process fosters relationships that deepen participants' knowledge of ourselves and each other.

CDW was conceived and developed by the Folk Arts Program staff of The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes, drawing on partnerships with Elmira College, GLOW Traditions, Chemung County Historical Society, Steele Memorial Library, and a growing number of local community organizations—including African American, Jewish, South Asian, Muslim, Seneca Nation, and labor union groups. The program has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts through multiple iterations—in 2021 and 2023, with another tentatively planned for 2025. The CDW team-based approach is integral and carefully curated. The facilitators take care to blend perspectives and skill sets, organizing teams around insiders to the local groups being documented. This combination of emic and etic perspectives helps to create collaborations that reflect the prerogatives of the local subject communities, while encouraging accessible, contextualized explanations of cultural practices for wider audiences. After weeks of training and documentation, the program culminates with a screening of documentary short-form videos produced by each team, featuring an aspect of their community.



CDW participants learn how to level a tripod during a workshop on filming interviews. Photo by Victoria Scott.

In this article, we describe CDW from several angles: as a showcase for local and regional cultural traditions, as a community-building project, and as a teaching model for documentary methods. We envision CDW as a long-term investment in nurturing the infrastructure for residents to document and share their cultures, express their needs, and develop technical skills for years to come. It has also built stronger networks between local organizations. Through its team-based approaches, step-by-step guidance from trained ethnographers and oral historians, and community expertise, CDW offers valuable ideas for teachers, folklorists, and community members aiming to create similar programs in their own schools or communities.

Program Context and Development

The Southern Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York faces challenges common to many rural, deindustrialized areas. Although rich in culture and history, our population is aging and shrinking, with poverty rates above the national average. In this context, many residents don't recognize some of what makes our region special, and various cultural communities often remain isolated from one another.

Documenting contemporary folklife in our community is urgent in and of itself, yet we also see CDW as an opportunity for meaning-making, expanding and strengthening local networks, and directing resources to local grassroots groups, all cornerstone goals of the Folk Arts Program at The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes. All year long, including the off years when workshops are not actively offered, CDW facilitators are in contact with potential community participants, preparing for the next workshop series, and working with past participants to determine ways of supporting their use of finished videos and other ways of supporting their efforts as cultural workers and tradition bearers. Program evaluations show our goals have been largely achieved, with participants reporting high satisfaction and significant benefits for underrepresented communities.

We intentionally bring together groups of people who likely haven't worked together before, which can be a transformative experience. Participation provides learning experiences that require people to work across cultural differences, technical abilities, and storytelling approaches. Our curriculum covers interviewing techniques, camera use, and editing—and goes beyond technical training to emphasize questions of representation, cultural fairness, and community voice. As one participant reflected, "Opening our eyes to the different issues of diversity around us was powerful. The discussions we had really helped me understand things I hadn't considered before."* Similar sentiments echo throughout participant feedback, suggesting that the collaborative structure of the CDW provides a powerful learning experience, not just a means to produce more meaningful and accessible media.

The resulting documentary pieces circulate beyond the workshop or the initial premiere to live on in other venues in our local communities and beyond. All fieldwork and production files are preserved in the Chemung County Historical Society and in community partners' archives. Finished products are available to the general public through [Southern Finger Lakes Traditions](#), a media-rich website The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes manages to share profiles of regional folk culture.

* Comments from participants are based on interviews with Judith Rowe from an evaluation after the first iteration of the CDW (Rowe 2022).

Partner Organizations and Roles CDW was created through a partnership between multiple organizations, each bringing different expertise and resources.

The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes serves artists and arts and cultural organizations of all disciplines, schools, professional and volunteer presenting organizations, and the public in Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, Tioga, and Cattaraugus counties, including the Allegany and Cattaraugus Territories of the Seneca Nation of Indians. Folk Arts Coordinator T.C. Owens is the primary director, and Victoria Scott is a co-facilitator, managing online meetings, note keeping, and curriculum development and serving as point person.

Elmira College provides a liberal arts education and promotes service-learning opportunities for students, including community engagement and internship hours through CDW participation. Associate Professor of Anthropology Doc M. Billingsley is a co-facilitator of CDW, primarily offering workshops on interviewing, note taking, transcription, and ethics in fieldwork.

GLOW Traditions supports folk arts programming in Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, and Wyoming counties in Western New York. Folklorist Karen Canning leads sections of CDW curriculum and advises teams on their projects.

Chemung County Historical Society manages the largest archive of local historical documents and provides secure preservation of materials gathered and produced by CDW teams. The society also provides spaces for full-day participant meetings. Archivist Rachel Dworkin is a co-facilitator who advises teams on primary source research.

Chemung County Library District Makerspace offers free community spaces for technological training, including computer labs equipped with video editing software. Makerspace Specialist Steve Smith assists with training participants in Adobe Premiere Elements and managing the check-out of filming equipment.

Partner community organizations include local organizations that support communities bound by cultural traditions, shared faiths, or organized labor ties. Community scholars from each organization participate, representing their group's viewpoint and earning a stipend for their work.

Past organizations include the Southern Tier Indian Cultural Association, Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes, United Steel Workers Local 1000, Congregation Kol Ami, Elmira Center for Cultural Advancement, Food for the Spirit, and the Stanley "Sully" Huff Heritage Center of the Onöndowa'ga (Seneca) on the Cattaraugus Territory of the Seneca Nation of Indians.

The Essential Role of Community Scholars

Fieldwork lays the groundwork for developing relationships with communities and their scholars. Facilitators attend community events to meet people, learn about the issues and needs of the communities, and discuss how documenting community folklife can contribute toward advancing their goals.

An essential aspect of CDW is that facilitators take the time to build trust with communities and identify potential scholar partners long before workshops begin. Early conversations are exploratory: floating the idea of a documentary workshop; describing previous projects; showing examples of videos, curriculum, and a rough schedule. Some of these conversations are one-on-one, while others are with boards or advisory committees. This includes planning conversations to develop story ideas that reflect communities' interests. These steps help to ensure that community scholars themselves have a vested interest in documenting and representing the stories told by each

CDW team. Prior to the workshop series launch, all the community scholars come together to introduce themselves, their inspirations, and their topics to one another. We seek to build community every step of the way. Agendas are structured but flexible enough to allow for conversations to flow freely so that community scholars can build connections between one another, their visions, and their communities.

During the CDW sessions, community scholars provide guidance and coordination between their community partner organization and their CDW team. Each scholar receives a stipend in acknowledgment of the long-term commitment, responsibility, and trust the role entails. A community scholar advises their project teams on whom to contact about interviews, provides context about the project goals, accompanies their documentary team on interviews and documentation events as able, and serves as an integral member of their documentary team. In the world of film and video, we might call them producers.



CDW community scholars share their experiences at a community screening of their video projects.
Photo by Victoria Scott.

Community Scholar in Practice: Christa Heyward

Christa Heyward joined CDW in 2021 as a community scholar. T.C met Christa early in his tenure as Folk Arts Manager at The ARTS Council through interviewing her father, Ira Heyward, a prominent figure in Elmira's Black community. Ira was a saxophonist, organist, drummer, basketball coach, and union-trained pipefitter and laborer at Corning Glassworks. The interview with Ira took place about a month before he passed, and both Christa and her mother, Julia, accompanied Ira to the interview to help him. The family chose to play Ira's interview on a laptop computer during the repast following his funeral at Grace Episcopal Church in Elmira.

From there, Christa and T.C. began working together to interview Black elders in Elmira's historic Eastside neighborhood—a community of predominantly Black and World War II-era European immigrants largely displaced by Hurricane Agnes in 1972 and subsequent “urban renewal” initiatives. These interviews were gathered in late 2019 and premiered at a local Black History Month event at the Chemung County Historical Society in 2020 only weeks before the pandemic began.

In the summer of 2021, Christa began laying groundwork for her contributions to CDW. She chose to work with the [Knox family, three generations of Black chefs and restaurateurs in Elmira](#). The main story she wished to tell was about Jesse Knox, the patriarch of the family, who worked in numerous kitchens throughout the Chemung Valley, including some of the finest restaurants and banquet halls in Corning. Jesse's daughter, Sue, and her son Kaylen, were the interviewees for the video.

Throughout that summer of 2021, when social life was still governed by masking and outdoor visits, Christa spent evenings on Sue's porch learning about the family, her father's impact on herself and her son, topics Sue thought were important to convey in a story about her father, and, most importantly, gaining Sue's trust in Christa's ability to shape this story. This deep relationship-building through fieldwork, before the workshop even began, allowed Christa to lead her team—all from outside the Black community—to understand not just the facts of Jesse Knox's life, but also the significance of his legacy within the broader context of the Black experience in the Southern Finger Lakes.

Once the workshop was underway, Christa served as a bridge between the documentary team and the Knox family. She guided the team's approach to interviews, helped identify key visuals to collect, and provided essential context that shaped the final narrative. The resulting video not only told Jesse Knox's personal story but also connected it to broader themes of Black entrepreneurship, family legacy, and community resilience in the face of systemic challenges. This video later found an unexpected additional audience when it was featured in the Rockwell Museum's *Heroes* exhibit, reaching visitors from around the world. When Sue and Kaylen opened a new restaurant in downtown Elmira later that year, the video was able to help create excitement around their new eatery, WMC North.

Christa's participation was exemplary and directly informed future iterations of the community scholar role. She was able to invest months in relationship-building before filming began, served as a cultural interpreter during production, and helped to ensure that the final product honored both individual stories and collective experiences. Her work demonstrates how community scholars transform the documentation process into collaborative storytelling.

The Team-Based Approach

The CDW team approach to documenting lets individuals use their unique expertise while also gaining new skills supported both by their teammates and CDW facilitators, many of whom are trained ethnographers and oral historians from local cultural institutions, including The ARTS Council, Elmira College, and the Chemung County Historical Society (see Partner Organization Roles box for full list of facilitators). This is a practical choice to share the workload: CDW unfolds over several months of work that people fit into already-busy lives. More importantly, it represents

a philosophical commitment to understanding documentation as a collaborative process of making meaning. Understanding, analysis, and representation become a collective process of sense-making. The resulting work reflects these differing orientations and points of view.

The collaboration begins with our daylong orientation, in which each community scholar presents to the entire cohort about who they are, the community they are from, and their project idea. Participants fill out surveys that assess their interest in each project, their skill sets, and their general availability. This helps us build teams with complementary skills and perspectives. When life events disrupt one member's participation, there are other people to catch the ball before it drops. This kind of workflow teaches communication, trust, and accountability.



CDW participants interview one another about culturally significant objects, while CDW facilitator Doc Billingsley talks about interviewing techniques. Photo by Victoria Scott.

Insider and Outsider Perspectives

Creating teams that mix insiders and outsiders, bringing together community scholars (insiders) with participants from the broader region (outsiders) is central to the CDW approach. This structure creates bridges between perspectives, deliberately positioning teams at the intersection of deep cultural knowledge and fresh outside perspective. The community scholar serves as cultural guide, while other team members bring technical skills, questions, and new ways of seeing that can note and express cultural elements that insiders might take for granted. This collaborative framework also reshapes the power dynamics of documentation.

Case Studies: Community Projects in Action

CDW videos advance the goals, visions, and needs of each organization, sharing stories of cultural resilience, the artistry of tradition bearers, and intergenerational cultural sustainability. In this way, the documentation is always inherently timely, reflecting the moments in which they were produced.

Congregation Kol Ami: Adaptation and Survival

For example, our first CDW cohort started meeting in the fall of 2021, just as new variants of Covid-19 were surging in the region. One of our community partners at the time was Congregation Kol Ami (CKA) in Elmira, the sole remaining Jewish congregation in the Elmira-Corning region. A community for whom survival is often at the front of their minds because of an aging and dwindling population, the members of Kol Ami adapted their High Holy Days and, like congregations of many faiths across the world, became DIY television studios overnight.

Their annual food festival that historically drew 400 to 500 attendees became a monthly subscription-based “Nosh of the Month.” The finished video ended up being a story of community survival and commitment to tradition through adaptation. Additionally, following the conclusion of the workshop series, CKA’s community scholar took her new skills in video production and storytelling and became a more active member of the synagogue’s technology team, documenting and editing that year’s Purim spiel—work that continues today.

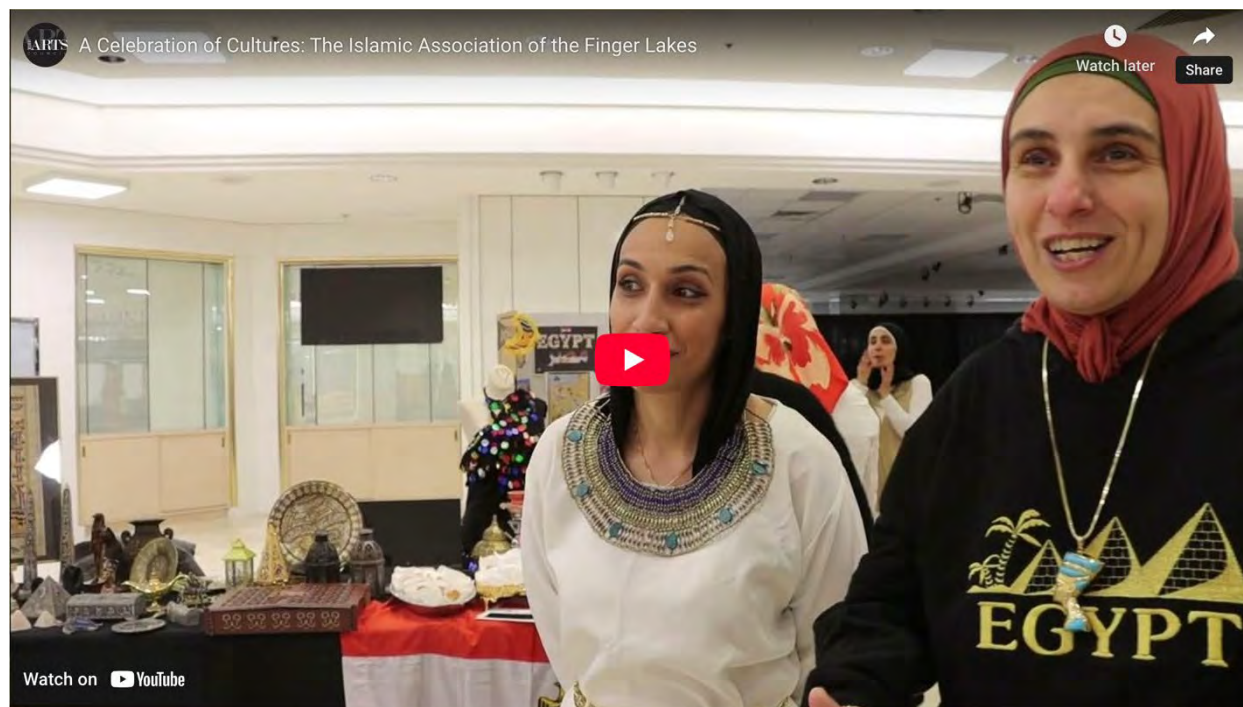
Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes: Unity in Diversity

Our collaboration with the Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes (IAFL)—the spiritual center and community hub for Muslim families in the Elmira-Corning area—demonstrates CDW’s flexibility in creating space for communities to navigate complex contemporary issues while centering their self-defined narratives and values. Its membership includes families from over 40 countries across five continents. IAFL has participated in two CDW cohorts. Its first team was made up of adult leaders and its second cohort was high school students from the IAFL led by the Imam, Dr. Zaman Marwat.

In 2023 IAFL had been planning a Celebration of Cultures festival to take place in a former department store turned convention center in the local shopping mall. The IAFL high school students decided to make their CDW video highlighting some of the community members’ exhibit tables and what they valued about their homes. The goal of the video mirrored the goal of the event: to highlight IAFL’s unity while celebrating its profoundly diverse community.

The Celebration of Cultures took place October 14, 2023, a week after conflict broke out between Hamas and Israel. Knowing this moment would affect the recorded interviews that day, T.C. reached out to community scholar Imam Marwat that morning to ask for his guidance on how the young people should approach their documentation efforts. He explained that local news outlets had been coming to IAFL that entire week asking for statements on the conflict, and that it’s often the case that the media only engage their community in moments of strife in the Middle East or when moments of Islamophobia arise in the U.S. “We have been planning this as a day of unity and celebration for nine months,” said Imam Marwat, “and we don’t want today to be impacted by the event.”

We were directed by the Imam and the Board not to ask questions specifically about the invasion of Gaza and how people were feeling in the moment. But people spoke to it anyway, and in some instances in profound ways, proclaiming calls for peace in the name of universal human rights and to question mainstream representations of Muslim communities.



A Celebration of Cultures: The Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes. Produced by IAFL and The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes. <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/celebration-of-cultures>

As the young folks, Imam Marwat, and T.C. continued to edit the video as a team on weeknights after prayer in the library, they continued to grapple with how to represent the Celebration of Cultures event itself, while acknowledging the moment they were (and continue to be) living in, and how to make something that could honor the dignity of the local Muslim community in a lasting way.

Every editing project—no matter how long or short the final project is intended to be—reaches the inevitable stage of cutting favorite footage. “Is this footage *really* central to the story we’re trying to tell? Or do *I* just love it?” The scene in question specifically invoked Palestine in a context of universal human rights. The interviewee says, “We’re all just trying to raise our families, send our kids to good schools, and feed our children.”

“Do we really need this?” asked one of the high school students. “It seems so obvious and self-evident.”

“We need to keep saying it,” responded Imam Marwat, “because there are those that continue to think our community doesn’t deserve it.”

The clip stayed in. It was a moment where Zaman really took an editorial viewpoint, whereas throughout the project he said to the students, “Just because I am the Imam doesn’t mean you need to listen to me. Do what you think.”



The Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes. Produced by IAFL and The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes. <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/islamic-association-of-the-finger-lakes-a-brief-history>

Outcomes, Impacts, and Community Building

We host a final community screening of the documentary shorts about six months after the workshop series concludes. The program includes contextualizing CDW and the process of how the videos are produced, screening the videos themselves, and then a moderated panel with all CDW participants. We allow six months to provide ample time to polish each video: Make final edits, get final approval from interviewees, standardize fonts and credits, add subtitles, and build one full screening “reel.” The audience mirrors the workshop participants, made up of members of the collaborating communities and members of the public who value stories about local history and culture. It’s often the first time that interviewees get to see the extent of the project they’ve participated in. Likewise, CDW participants get to meet with and engage in conversation with people from multiple communities. The final community screening and subsequent public programs connect us with the broader constituency of each community partner in the project, as well as the public. These events often reveal the deeper impacts of the program beyond the videos.

Distribution and Engagement

CDW is a tremendous undertaking for such a small organization, and it succeeds because of partnerships. In many ways, it is a laboratory for nurturing relationships and learning about the needs, values, and organizational priorities of the partnering organizations. Given the deep relationship building and the strong reactions to the videos, The ARTS Council works with the community scholars after the final screening to support additional screenings and other next steps.

While the videos are products of collaboration and community visions, they appeal primarily to very local and very passionate audiences. In this age of social media, they are unlikely to “go viral.” Community media is at its best when it is viewed *as a community* and used as a conversation

tool. Beyond the premiere community screening, we also plan additional individual screenings for each community organization to begin integrating the videos into their own work and community. For example, Food for the Spirit, a BIPOC-led food and environmental justice organization, used the video they produced about Mutual Aid Wildlife Rehabilitation as the basis for crafting a workshop on developing public narratives for use in campaigns. Food for the Spirit paired their video alongside Marshal Ganz's workshop curriculum on "Self, Us, Now" (Ganz 2015).

Another example of organic next steps was provided by follow-up work with Jocelyn J. Jones of Ancient Voices Media. Jocelyn is an enrolled member of the Seneca Nation of Indians and a niece of the [Haudenosaunee potter Peter B. Jones](#). Jocelyn and her sister Cami produced a video about their uncle's work revitalizing Haudenosaunee pottery styles and firing techniques. Jocelyn and Cami decided to enter their piece in the Buffalo International Film Festival, not far from Seneca territories, where it was accepted in the Western New York Documentary Shorts category. Additionally, so much fantastic footage was left out of the original documentary short, The ARTS Council created a second contract with Ancient Voices Media to continue filming footage to complement the unused interview footage. Cami began working with her uncle more intently, so we crafted a successful Folk and Traditional Arts apprenticeship grant application to the New York State Council on the Arts to compensate them. Now Pete can continue teaching Cami hand-building techniques, clay harvesting, clay preparation, and pit firing with the intention to cook traditional foods in the resulting pots.



CDW participants conduct a stand-up interview at a cultural fair organized by the Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes. Photo by T.C. Owens.



Video still from “Pottery Pete: Revitalizing Hodinöhsö:ni:h Pottery,” produced by Ancient Voices Media, The Seneca Nation of Indians, and The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes.

Participant Transformation

Beyond strengthening the ties between community organizations, a 2021 program evaluation found that 100 percent of participants felt respected, included, and able to share their ideas and opinions freely. Many mentioned that they appreciated the opportunity to learn more deeply about other people and cultures in the region. One person noted, “...the opportunity to share with a broader set of people who can get to know various cultures within their community—highlighting what we have in common and what we can celebrate as differences.” Another appreciated “...the amount of diversity education that I experienced by collaborating with the other teams and ... the depth of information that came from the videos. Being in the workshops with the other teams created even deeper knowledge sharing and subsequent feelings of respect for the communities involved and their cultures.” One participant was inspired to continue “work with groups in our community to capture and archive their stories. I became inspired to further my education in the area of archival studies.”

Community Impact

The workshop has built institutional capacity, as several organizations have continued documentation work beyond the workshop, applying for additional grants or incorporating media production into their existing programs. CDW has strengthened connections between community organizations that might otherwise have little interaction. At public screenings, community members have repeatedly commented on learning about the diversity in Elmira that they hadn't been aware of previously. The documentation process often becomes a form of validation for the featured communities, creating a media product that was shaped through their own participation and decision-making authority.

Conclusion

The Community Documentation Workshop offers a model for collaborative ethnographic education that centers community voices while building sustainable, long-term documentation capacity among local organizations. Favoring team-based approaches, CDW demonstrates how folklife documentation can simultaneously preserve cultural heritage, build intercultural understanding, and develop technical skills across diverse communities.

As we prepare for our 2025 cohort, we continue to refine this model based on participant feedback and changing community needs. The success of CDW lies not just in the videos produced, but also in the relationships forged, skills developed, and stories that continue to unfold long after the workshops conclude. For educators and folklorists seeking to develop similar programs, CDW provides both a philosophical framework and practical roadmap for transformative documentation practice.

Want to learn more about how we structure learning in CDW? Find our Photo Album Assignment and others in the [Classroom Connections](#) that directly follow this article!



Nat Smith, Director of Mutual Aid Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, in their home garden. Photos by Anneke Radin-Snaith.

T.C. Owens is a folklorist and videographer. Since 2007 he has worked collaboratively to document, preserve, and present the vital traditions of everyday people and their communities. He holds an MA in Folklore from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has worked at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, Media Mobilizing Project, and as a contract folklorist for the Northern Tier Cultural Alliance and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in Northeast Pennsylvania, where he grew up. He is also a director and producer of the documentary short [Our Side: Growing Up In The Other Atlantic City](#) and many other documentary shorts. He is the Folk Arts Manager at The ARTS Council of the Southern Finger Lakes in Corning, NY.

Doc M. Billingsley is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Elmira College, where he also serves as Director of the Sustainability minor. His research employs participatory engaged ethnography methods that build lasting relationships with the communities he studies. In addition to work with the Community Documentation Workshop in the Southern Tier region, his research focuses on Mayan language revitalization movements and historical memory activism in Guatemala.

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Community members listen to CDW participants following a screening of their video projects. Photo by Victoria Scott.

URLs

Southern Finger Lakes Traditions <https://sflxtraditions.org>

Jesse Knox's Story <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/elmira-center-for-cultural-advancement-jesse-knox-story>

Congregation Kol Ami: Adaptation and Survival <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/congregation-kol-ami-jewish-life-in-elmira>

Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes: Unity in Diversity <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/celebration-of-cultures>

Islamic Association of the Finger Lakes: A Brief History <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/islamic-association-of-the-finger-lakes-a-brief-history>

Mutual Aid Wildlife Rehabilitation Center: Intersectional Environmentalism in the Finger Lakes <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/mutual-aid-wildlife-rehabilitation-center/>

Pottery Pete: Revitalizing Hodinöhsö:ni:h Pottery <https://sflxtraditions.org/cultural-mapping/peter-b-jones>

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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

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.

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.

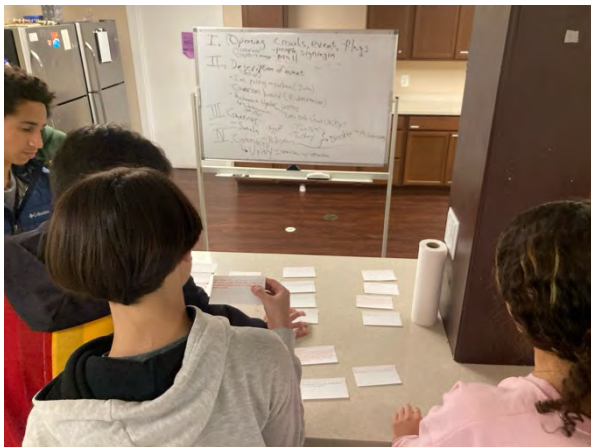
These stories that we tell in a group—artfully and with intention in a documentary style—often create many forms of connection among the cohort. They may raise issues about where people struggle to share certain elements of their identity, but they also illustrate strategies that

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.

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.