

# 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?

## 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, light-



Katie Wicks and Mr. Nantais

Photo by Carol Spellman

ing, 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 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 inter-

## Listening Activities

Before sending students out in the community to videotape 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. **Videotaped 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.

view 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.

**Review Questions.** Review the list of questions and ask, "Are the essential questions being asked?" Has enough background information been researched to generate questions and do they have the confidence to ask educated questions not on their list? The surprising, sad, poignant, or hilarious moments in documentary stories are often uncovered when interview-

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## Kentucky Remembers

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telling we express our ideals, our relationship to others, speak to and about our communities and our collective struggle for justice. Intergenerational interviewing not only builds bridges between the old and young, it builds a bridge to the future, so subsequent generations can understand that the struggle for human rights is led by individuals working in their own communities to bring about a more just world.

### Lifelong Lessons

The college students who served as staff for *Kentucky Remembers* also learned from the oral history interview process. They gained confidence, discovered huge gaps in their own knowledge about the past, learned to work as a team, and recognized the roles they could play as leaders in their communities. Several indicated a newfound sense of direction in their lives following the summer experience.

*Kentucky Remembers* is at its core a human rights-based curriculum. The goals of teaching and documenting the past link directly to the struggle for justice in the present and the desire for a more just world in the future. Through the interview process learning becomes multidirectional: teachers learn from their students and students learn from their interviewees and from each other. As folklorists working with youth to conduct interviews, we gained a deeper understanding and greater respect for the power of the interview process to build bridges and communicate not just the stories of the past but hope for the future.

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