

Documentary Storytelling Techniques: Mapping Strategies among Film Students

Wan Aida Wan Yahaya^{1*}, Shamila Mohamed Shuhidan²

¹Faculty of Film, Theatre and Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
Puncak Perdana Campus, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
wanaida486@uitm.edu.my

²Faculty Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
Puncak Perdana Campus, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
shamila@uitm.edu.my

*Corresponding Author

<http://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v16i3.10273>

Received: 10 February 2019

Accepted: 25 June 2020

Date of Online publication: 20 October 2020

Published: 20 October 2020

Abstract: Documentaries are a unique form of filmmaking. It allows for the common man/woman to address large, important issues that are able to shake society. It involves a small portion of power as it addresses a wide range of subject matters such as history, anthropology, 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 start out to understand the process of documentary filmmaking, many struggle in terms of identifying appropriate content suited for that of a documentary. Students are unable to develop appropriate strategies towards identifying the type of stories to tell. This research seeks out exploring an idea and story identification technique, specifically through the use of strategic mapping, as a means of helping students to understand the layers required in planning and constructing a documentary story. 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 that through a repetitive process, students' are able to develop, change and extend their first impression responses as they begin to understand the process of documentary story and content identification.

Keywords: Documentaries, Mapping strategies, Storytelling

1. 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 watches in the cinema, documentary feature films are a mixed 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 remains. 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 of bits of information that have 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, *March of the Penguins* (2005), *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011), *Blackfish* (2013), and *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? Are these strategies suitable to assist students?

The aim 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 in its ability to provide filmmaking students with appropriate strategies in identifying documentary story ideas. The scope of the research is on films students who sit through 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.

Aside from Bernard (2007), Dovey and Rose (2013) and Rabiger (2014), work by Natusch and Hawkins (2014) explore the manner in which Bill Nichols’ concept of ‘modes’ is applied to the analysis of two forms of documentaries. Natusch and Hawkins 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 research take an empirical approach towards the process of evaluating documentary content, in which a microanalysis is conducted on the modes based on two different documentary films. 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 suggests 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 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/approaches is found and shared in work by Parker (2014). Parker explains her approach in a step-by-step manner as she starts by gathering the first draft of student ideas based on an initial mind-map through an identification of key words. This is followed by a listing of words associated with the key words. The key words identified bring about various suggestions of idea development that leads to 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 or theme 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. Nevertheless, while Parker demonstrates on technique, the direction of this research takes an extended, in-depth critical perspective of the aforementioned strategy. It provides a critical descriptive analysis of the techniques discussed to evaluate the process and its potential.

2. Method

The research is interpretive in nature; therefore, action research is applied. Additionally, a case study approach was selected to address the aim of the study in examining the objectives outlined (Sabbir, 2019). 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 research process is outlined in Table 1, as follows:

Table 1. Strategy of the 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

There are four basic steps in the action research cycle – plan, act, observe/collect data, and 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To identify strategies for story/storytelling ideas ● To develop strategies for story/storytelling ideas
Research Design	Action Research
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Duration –two (2) semesters ● Group sample – two (2) groups ● Students were informed as to the purpose of the research – to develop documentary idea strategies
Act/Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Act 1: Students watch ten (10) feature film documentaries ● Act 2: Students draw mind maps of possible documentary stories and related themes ● Act 3: Students read documentary reviews/write-ups regarding the documentaries they have watched. ● Act 4: Students review the initial mapping strategy and remap their story ideas and themes into a three-column grid ● Act 5: Responses are discussed

Phase / Steps	Issue(s)/Action(s)/Findings
<p>Observe/Observation</p>	<p>Result of Act 1: Students are provided input and visual simulation as a form of a full-length documentary feature film.</p> <p>Result of Act 2: Based on their impressions from the screened documentary, students draw a mind map based on first impressions/thoughts/ideas.</p> <p>Result of Act 3: Students gain further insight into the documentary based on reviews and articles written.</p> <p>Result of Act 4: Students are to generate a new mind map based on the three-column grid map. They re-evaluate their initial input based on actions in Act 1 – Act 3.</p> <p>Result of Act 5: Students reconsider their responses. They review and re-evaluate the purpose and direction that they want their stories to take. Ideas are not longer based on first impressions but on knowledge of the subject matter.</p>
<p>Research Findings</p>	<p>Students have a sense of the nature of a feature length documentary.</p> <p>Students realise that first impressions or first responses do not make for a clear, in-depth story idea.</p> <p>Students are able to identify and develop better and different story ideas after additional information is provided about the subject matter.</p> <p>Students extend their story ideas, perspectives and angles as to the direction of the new stories.</p> <p>Students generate new ideas with potential of becoming strong documentary films.</p>

Phase / Steps	Issue(s)/Action(s)/Findings
	<p>Students' story ideas are better composed, structured, organized, thought through prior to the identification of the final proposed story.</p>
<p>Reflect/Reflection</p>	<p>The actions taken were effective in identifying students' thought process 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>The weaknesses of the actions are in its ability to ensure consistency among the students for future idea generating projects.</p> <p>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.</p>

3. Results and Discussion

A total of 162 documentary writing students have participated in the research over a period of two semesters. Prior to the execution of the actions, ten (10) documentary feature films were screened to the students. The screening sessions were conducted to ensure that students understood the nature and stories behind full length feature documentaries.

After the screening of the documentaries, students were asked to verbally respond in the form of one-word first impressions/one-word first responses. Students' key word identification were mapped onto the board. Students were then asked to draw a mind map, by writing key words as to what they thought or perceived were the important components of the documentaries. Students were tasked to associate the main idea/theme of the film with a single word that they believed was reflected by the story.

While the students successfully drew first impression mind maps in response to generating initial ideas, their suggestions were limited to the first layer of story that was present in the documentary. Students were then required to extend their mind maps beyond their first impressions, and to associate their initial ideas with other possible words that were important to the documentary. Students were required to redesign their mind map into a 3-column frame. Students then identified key words that were unique or different. A new set of words were mapped during Phase II. After which, students identified and selected possible key words that they would like to explain in terms of creating a new documentary or a new story.

The following phase provides students with additional information with regards to the documentaries they had just watched. Background information and history of the documentaries were provided and discussed. Students were then asked to re-evaluate their earlier responses. Students' begin to identify and extend their initial key words now, within a contextual understanding of the subject matter, that allows for the development of stronger documentary stories. 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 and opinions as well as their responses as a means of formulating a good documentary story idea.

Based on the mapping strategy executed, students are able to identify key themes with one word responses. While these responses are considered correct, students' responses cannot be limited to first impressions or first ideas as these ideas are considered spontaneous and unrefined. Students are required to now focus on the consideration of which story idea would a potential audience be willing to follow and watch. Students debate and argue in terms of the potential of extended key words identified. This action leads to the enabling of students to take into consideration the various perspectives and angles that their story ideas can take. It also identifies the varied potential of the numerous story directions that can be highlighted.

Nevertheless, while the application of this mapping strategy is applied to the response of ten documentary screening sessions, it is not limited to the possible directions that any story can take. It needs to be noted that this mapping method/strategy may not be the only method that is capable of developing students' documentary story/ideas.

4. 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 allow 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. Hence, 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 of student participation and feedback. Hence, the students need to develop and have a passion and empathy in their engagement with the documentary subject matter to ensure their commitment in creating new stories for the big screen.

The results of this research can be extended to 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 and critical consideration that they apply in efforts to enhance their understanding of its approaches. Hence, students develop stronger storytelling 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 that simultaneously enhances their understanding of documentary storytelling.

5. Acknowledgements

This paper was supported by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 600-RMI/DANA 5/3/ARAS(90/2016).

6. References

- Bernard, S.C. (2004). *Documentary storytelling* (2nd ed.). US: Focal Press Publications.
- Collins, H. (2010). *Creative Research: The theory and practice of research for the creative industries*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing.
- Das, T. (2007). *How to write a documentary script*. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/programme_doc_documentary_script.pdf. Accessed June 2017. *Documentary Impact: Social change through storytelling*. US: Hot Docs, Inspirit Foundation and Panicaro Foundation. http://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.hotdocs.ca/doc/HD14_Documentary_Impact_Report.PDF. Accessed 15 September 2017.
- Dovey, J. (2014). Documentary Ecosystems: Collaboration and Exploitation. In, *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses*. Eds. Nash, K., Hight, C. & Summerhayes, C.). UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dovey, J. and Rose, M. (2013). This great mapping of ourselves new documentary forms online. In: Winston, B., ed. (2013) *The Documentary Film Book*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 366-375. ISBN 9781844573417 <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/17085/2/BFIDovey-Rose2012.pdf>. Accessed 9 September 2017.
- Natusch, B. & Hawkins, B. (2014). Mapping Nichols' modes in documentary film: *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *Helvetica*. *The IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication and Film*, vol. II, issue I, Summer 2014.
- Parker, K. (2014). *Ideas for documentary topics*. SlideShare. <https://www.slideshare.net/kathrynparkerx/ideas-for-documentary-topics>. Accessed 3 April 2019.
- Sabbir, F. (2019). Perceived View of Teachers Towards Pentaksiran Tingkatan Tiga (PT3) (Form Three Assessment) English Language: A Case Study. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 15(3), 34. doi:10.24191/ajue.v15i3.7819
- Uricchio, W. (2014). *Mapping the intersection of two cultures: Interactive documentary and digital journalism*. A report supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and MIT Open Documentary Lab. US: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). https://www.academia.edu/18603926/_Mapping_the_Intersection_of_Two_Cultures_Interactive_Documentary_and_Digital_Journalism. Accessed 9 October 2017.