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Making a micro documentary on a shoestring budget: Preproduction

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Making a micro-documentary on a shoestring budget is quite a doable task, especially if you are a student. Let me make it clear from the start that I am not writing about making a documentary for the open market. I am talking here about making documentaries for beginners in educational contexts. Over the last seven years I have executively produced about 60 student micro-documentaries, all of them with tiny budgets. This article is for teachers and students of media who traditionally have little or no extra budget to work with beyond their school’s media equipment. I am assuming that educators reading this have an interest in making documentaries and that their budding student filmmakers will have access to the appropriate equipment. They will need digital mini DV cameras, digital video recording tapes, preferably external microphones and one or more computers with editing software, video capture facility and ample storage space. We provide these within our students’ course, however, most schools have access to one or more cameras and students increasingly have access to them privately. This article focuses on pre-production, which involves: modelling and contextualisation of the product, forming production teams, brainstorming, research, planning, designing, ‘semi-scripting’ the narrative and pitching the documentary concept. Although this is designed mainly for media curriculum contexts, the basic techniques and elements of documentary making can be used across the curriculum. This is the first of two articles, the next of which will focus on production and post production.

Modelling and providing a context
At the outset is seems daunting even to make a five minute micro documentary. Very often students have had little or no experience and some have not done much more than take still pictures.

I always begin by providing a ‘programming’ context. It’s good to use a series of short documentaries, such as the excellent ABCs ‘Moments in Time,’ which was an excellent series of five minute documentaries broadcast on Sunday just before the evening news on the ABC in 2002. It has been repeatedly broadcast and has a wide and rich variety of different stories and styles within the series. These provide the ‘programming context,’ which gives the students an audience to aim for and an idea of exploiting a topic concept. Other series that could be used are the SBS series, ‘Nest,’ which explores different people’s intimate domestic spaces. A really interesting series is SBSs’ 2002 documentary series, ‘Hybrid Life’ which explores hybrid identity through stories of Australian migrants. Another good series to use as models is the SBS series ‘Tales from a Suitcase,’ which also tells wonderful migrant stories, with a simple locked-on camera interview interspersed with stills and archival footage. This is a very inexpensive, but effective approach to storytelling in digital form on a limited budget. Any series which shows micro documentaries such as these will serve as a great model. The models you choose will depend on the type of product you and your students want to make. In this article I will focus on making a documentary which tells a brief story about a central character.

I follow the modelling and deconstruction of the documentaries in these professional series with a plethora of student micro-documentaries, to show how interesting and well made stories can be made using local talent and contexts. These models also demonstrate how production teams have worked around the challenges and found creative solutions to producing a video on almost no budget. The concept of a
‘moment in time’ leaves a very open and broad canvas upon which to draw stories. To get around copyright you can call your series a ‘Slice of Life,’ or something similarly open to interpretation. You could also source additional or alternative models from ‘Film Australia’s’ archives, which house a wide range of documentaries as videostreams.

**Brainstorming the character and concept**

In the first few meetings, all students brainstorm who or what they know or know of, with an interesting story to tell. After all most of the stories in ‘Moments in Time,’ series are about ordinary people who reveal parts of their history which connect to places, times or historical events. Some of the stories in ‘Moments in Time’ are about places, such as the one featuring an erstwhile South Australian women’s prison and ‘madhouse’ that was converted to a music conservatoryvi. The place is given interest by archival photographs of the people who were interned there and relatives and historians who talk about it now. I recall Russell Porter telling a class of us budding documentary makers taking an AFTRS documentary course, that, ‘almost anyone’s story can be made interesting, so potentially you can make a documentary about anyone. It’s how you tell the story that counts’. I have always cherished that advice and spread the word, as once the students start to dig they find there are many people they know who could become the subject of a documentary. It could be their mother or grandfather, a friend or other relative or even someone with whom they work.

We write up on the whiteboard all the topics/ subjects, initially discarding none, because the potential is always there to develop a story concept around that ‘character’ if one chosen to go ahead fails to gain purchase. Of course although everyone may have a story, not all are willing to tell it or have a video crew invade
their privacy and their lives to make a documentary. Students thus must research the logistical reality of time necessary to make the story they want to tell, willingness of the subject to have a film made about them and access possibilities. The topics are then narrowed down to a smaller range, due to access or permission or logistical concerns. In a class of 25 we usually have 5 or 6 team projects which move forward towards further design and production. The students form production teams around the topics and the person who has the strongest connection and access to the subject of their story. It always amazes my students and me how generous people are in allowing people to come into share their lives, interrogate their past and have others tell their story.

**Preproduction Research**

Once teams have determined their topic it is time to do further research, around the background of the ‘central character.’ Research is extremely important to any documentary film writing, whether it’s fictionalised documentary or not. Video is a highly selective medium- you may use only 5% or your research- the rest is the invisible 9/10ths of the iceberg- underpinning the import and messages of the film. Without researching the character and story and discovering the visual and audio visual materials to support it, you may end up with a 2 dimensional project, or just a series of talking heads, which may be less than stimulating. Often the research period raises interesting sub-text narrative strands, which change the original project altogether, as more information and other people who might take part in the story are uncovered. Even the central character may change as a result of the research process. For instance one team wanted to make a story about the Brisbane Powerhouse which was converted from an abandoned electrical powerhouse to a thriving cultural centre.
The central character was to be an articulate historian, but when photographing the building the team met some circus performers, abseiling down the walls from the roof. They discovered that some of the acrobats had been squatters in the formerly derelict building. Since time was at a premium (they had one week left to edit and only five minutes of final product) and they had already shot so much footage and planned the story around the historian, they decided to sacrifice the acrobats’ story. The final documentary was good, however, if their research had been more thorough from the outset, they may have constructed a more interesting storyline around these colourful characters. Sometimes you have to ‘murder your darlings’ in this enterprise.

Almost certainly the range of materials uncovered, will help to determine the style of the final story. The whole look and pace of the powerhouse film would have been different had the central characters been acrobats instead of the more formal historian. Thorough and solid research also stimulates creativity and generates ideas. For instance I can imagine a visual structure juxtaposing the former tenants sliding down ropes with the descent into decay of the building and climbing up the walls paralleling the restoration and invigoration of the building for its new purpose. This could also symbolise the regeneration of the unemployed squatter into artists who fit the building’s new purpose. However this group did not have time to investigate these issues and reinterview new subjects. They knew that the best projects spring from clear knowledge and understanding of the subject. Research might uncover an interesting newspaper article or news report for instance which puts a new angle on the character’s central concern. Rather than go into research with preconceived ideas about content and style of your micro documentary, it’s important to allow the subject to speak to the team. As you research, bring a **film imagination** to bear upon the
material, seeing the subject in human terms. If you think visually from the outset, a film concept and style and shape will usually emerge.

**Designing the story**

It is almost impossible to write a complete documentary script unless it’s mostly historical re-enactment based on inquiry, such as the mystery surrounding ‘Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler’. This is obviously because if you are working with living people, telling their own stories, you cannot predict what they will say. Based on their initial research the story concept begins to emerge. At this early stage I ask students to develop a ‘hook’ into the story, which draws people into the central problem of the story.

**The hook: Framing the ‘central problem’**

The hook needs to grab the audience and let them know ‘we’re going to take you on a journey.’ It needs to answer the question, ‘how can I make the audience care about this character?’ To find a hook, a powerful question to ask yourself and your team from the outset is: what’s at stake in this documentary? In other words:

- Who cares about this topic?
- While watching this documentary, ‘what do I want my audience to know and/or feel?

In a micro documentary the topic or the idea should be able to be expressed in one sentence, so the focus of attention should be quite narrow. For instance your hook might be, ‘the former glamour model faces the ravages of aging and illness,’ or, ‘The Sudanese refugee gets a second chance at education so he can give something back to his country,’ or, ‘The jazz singer- talent born or constructed?’ The eminent
documentary maker Michael Rabiger, always suggested to, ‘think small, think local’\textsuperscript{viii}, when making a documentary. To keep it manageable in terms of times, locations, and access think about whom and what do you already know, who could be in your video. Does the team already have an emotional connection to the subject/topic? What is unusual or interesting about it? How narrowly can the program focus its attentions? For instance the spouse of one student was a former Commonwealth games swimmer who narrowly missed out on the Olympics, so the production team who made a documentary called ‘Tumbleturns,’ chose to focus on being ‘almost famous’ and what follows in life after the brush with fame. In one interesting case, the subject of the project was the game of stickball, which itself represented a frozen moment of time paradoxically distilled in the constant movement of interplay between a stick and a ball.

**Case study**

Stickball was a documentary about a ‘harmony’ game played with a stick and a ball. In a sense the game itself was the central character, although the players were their mouthpieces. Groups of young bohemian artists, regularly met in West End in Brisbane to play. The game involves smoothly moving the ball from one person to another using the boy and the stick. It’s cooperative rather than competitive and is beautiful to watch, something like Tai-Chi. They met on market day, so some marketeers became the subjects of the video, interviewed about what they knew of the game. It’s usual to interview at least 1 expert on the subject. In the case of stickball\textsuperscript{ix}, a group of regular players, who were also musicians and artists were interviewed together on a couch in their home. Footage was collected of them playing in various locations close to the area and at the Saturday morning West End Market. They were
also musicians, and gave permission for a jam to be filmed and used as an audio soundtrack, which was an added bonus, proving royalty free music to the documentary makers. One of the players was also an animator and gave reciprocal permission to use their animation from a web site about ‘Stickball’ in exchange for a copy of the final video to upload on their website. This was in keeping with the themes of harmony and cooperation engendered by the game of Stickball, so the production was a very smooth and effective one.

**The central character**

Brainstorm in your production teams around who that expert might be. This will be your central character. The one who tells the story is very important in a documentary. Once you have decided who this is, it’s important to be able to pitch this idea using the hook.

It’s best to conduct the interview first and then collect images to illustrate the points of discussion, or not covered in the interview to construct an argument. It is essential to have enough visual material to fill in the rest of the story however, as interview material alone can be quite boring to watch. The following materials may be useful artefacts to use in assembling the final product: still photographs, articles, news clippings, archival footage, journals and other writings; any objects of interest which impact on the story such as historical items of interest. The research phase is dedicated to uncovering these visual items, although this continues throughout the project, even up to the stage of assembling final footage, where something collected earlier might become a valuable insert.

**Assigning production roles**
Assign the roles your team members will play as a production group: researcher, assistant producer, (who does all the important paperwork) director, videographer, interviewer, question writer, stills photographer, editor (of course you can work together on all of these roles). In the final assembling stage you may again divide the role into photo/image maker, text writer, soundtrack composer and narrator. As soon as the teams are organised, begin logging the pre-production process including research time, current and retrospective meetings, legal issues, such as release letters, and access and logistical issues (who where and when to shoot). This logging is important to check fair contributions for assessment purposes if the documentary is part of the curriculum. Next the team begins planning ‘semi-scripting’ the narrative and pitching.

**Planning and sequencing your documentary story**

The narrative structure of a micro-documentary like most other film forms works best in three parts. Russell porter, the documentary filmmaker and teacher at RMIT, used a ‘dead fish metaphor’ to describe this sequence:

- Act 1- what’s at stake?
- Act 2- thesis/ antithesis
- Act 3-the tail winds up the end or relates back to the beginning.

In thinking about how to make this story visual, it’s important to bring a filmic imagination to the planning. Focus on one subject, and discuss what does s/he does to show what they think/ feel believe? What do we actually see and hear? While you are planning this, you can construct your notes as a three column script with audio, image and dialogue headings. You virtually have to be an editor in advance and design and plan the video as if you have seen and heard it already edited. A good tip is to think in
terms of **actions or groups of shots** rather than shot-by-shot. You can’t really write all the dialogue in a documentary script, because you don’t yet know what people will say, but you can certainly write a good, sharp set of open ended questions, which you want to ask your interview subject and you want your documentary to answer. Is your structure linear/circular/reflexive? How can you design questions to elicit this information? Is the story based on motif/symbol or image? What extra images will you need to collect to show symbols or images? How will you deal with the dimension of time, when you have such a short space of time to tell your story?

Students devise an initial list of interview questions and then set about making a basic treatment and shooting schedule before shooting, incorporating the archival and other materials around the interview(s). These are then all incorporated into the shooting schedule.

**Shooting Schedule**

Planning your shoot will save considerable production time. A schedule needs to account for times and dates to access ‘talent’, locations, transport, props, equipment and the budget and who-is-doing-what on the day of the shoot. So make lists of other footage you might make on location and elsewhere and devise a shooting schedule, with times, dates, locations, equipment and content descriptions of footage and/or images. A health and safety report is also warranted at this stage to ensure that no unnecessary risks are being taken during the shoot.

**Designing the soundtrack**

Even at the pre-production stage, you may already have some preconceived ideas about music, but in my experience this is the element which most often changes from pre to post production. There will be more tips on how to incorporate music and legal
copyright concerns and solutions with a shoestring budget in article 2 (SE). Still some ideas of music style to suit the style of the subject matter is useful at this point. Once you have collected all this research, you need to think about in what sequence/structure can this material be compiled in order to tell the most effective story for the target audience? You need to ask yourself, what’s this story about? Is it clear or ambiguous? How do you develop and deliver the information and message and also maintain cohesion by image/narration and sounds? In telling your story, sound is very important. The soundtrack can include; music/sound/audio, special FX (rhythm), ‘atmos’ (natural sounds captured by the camera such as splashing in a pool), background voices, VO or ‘Voice of God’ (an omniscient narrator), Synch SFX, and or abstract sounds.

**Style**

In terms of style, think about what would best suit your team project? Think about the central character and the type of story you are trying to tell. Open-observational style needs access and trust (and often this is built over time) support/rapport between documentary maker and subjects. So only choose this if you already know your subject well. There are many different styles of documentary and providing students have viewed some of these varied styles, they can incorporate elements into their documentary. Some of these documentary styles are; *Cinema verite-* which has both the strength of appearing very natural and true, but has the limitations of requiring a lot of time and effort to get to know the subject enough so that they will trust you to be closely involved with their life for a time. ‘To Get Rich is Glorious’ set in Hong Kong is an excellent example of this style of documentary, which is largely an observational or *fly on the wall* style. Magical realism is another style, such as in ‘Cosenza Vecchia’ in *Hybrid Life*. You can also use historical reconstruction and
archival, if the story goes back a long way and no footage of that part of the story exists. A good example of this is the documentary, ‘Who Killed Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler?’ Other styles involve deploying innovative, experimental multimedia techniques and mixed genres, for instance the documentary Islands, featuring Vincent Heiman, a Samoan/German filmmaker’s story of his own hybridity in the Hybrid Life series mixes animation with archival footage, reconstruction and interviews. Many documentaries rely on developing a thesis (an argument) and antithesis (counterargument) through exposition and this is the structure I suggest my students adopt. Often once the production team gathers footage, the style will often become apparent if it wasn’t from the outset.

**Planning the interview**

Anyone who is to be interviewed needs to be contacted and an interview arranged well beforehand, especially if they are busy people. A formal letter describing the project and an approximation of the time they may need to commit to, as well as where and how the final product will be screened is mandatory at this stage. Anyone appearing in the documentary will need to sign a ‘release form’ to allow you to include their images in your documentary. Any others interviewed for the project will need to sign separate release forms. If you interview children at school you may also need their parents’ or guardians’ signature to release their images for the documentary.

Access to your subject is very important in terms of gathering information. E mail or write a letter or that person and arrange the interview time(s) with them. Make sure you have written confirmation and a suitable time and location, which is quiet enough to conduct an interview, especially if you are limited to using the microphone in the
camera. I’ll discuss the importance of using a good external microphone in the next article on production and post production. Check the site of the interview and other appropriate locations beforehand if possible, take still shots and make notes on the suitability of the location for shooting and whether you will need natural or artificial light for the camera, so that you can see the interviewee clearly.

One project I recall, which had a potentially interesting story about a former jockey, (the father of one of the students) thought they had access to a horse race track, but in the end were limited to a position where they were only able to collect endless images of horses rear ends. A reshoot was demanded due to lack of effective planning. The project was saved in the end I might add, by very clever and time consuming editing in post production and discarding most of the wasted ‘wallpaper’ footage. Tighter initial planning of the shoot in pore production would have saved the group many hours of time.

Once you have confirmation of the interview, and the locations, as a team, refine and develop the initial set of questions to ask your interviewee, which take into account any further research and the narrative structure your team has planned. Make sure that some of these questions are open ended and that most of them require more than yes or no answers. Who, what, when, where, why and how questions are good to begin with. I will discuss this in more detail in the article to follow on production.

The pitch

Once all this is organised I get my students to ‘pitch’ their documentary to other students. This allows feedback on aspects of the production which are unclear or could be improved. If the premise for the micro documentary cannot be summarised within one strong sentence in the form of a hook, it’s likely that the story will take
longer than five minutes to tell. Most student documentary projects begin with a premise and a cast of characters that is too large for the small canvas they have to tell the story. The pitch gives the students the opportunity to refine and condense their ideas and to act as professional film makers and to negotiate around potential pitfalls before undertaking the time consuming process of filming and editing. The pitch involves an oral and multi-mediated presentation of no longer than 20 minutes which includes:

- the hook
- background knowledge on the central character
- any archival, new footage or visual information about their topic an subject
- synopsis of the proposed narrative structure
- ideas on sound, style and treatment
- the shooting schedule and budget
- a proposed script or treatment of at least one scene

The groups also present a written submission showing evidence of the pre-production process, including all meetings and research time spent on the project; visual material, and evidence of access and legal cover to participants in the project, a health and safety report and location releases. This culminating design task is assessed and usually demonstrates the group’s cohesion as a team as well as knowledge of film languages and technologies as well as awareness of audiences.

The next steps involve actually shooting the video and post production or editing which will be included in the next issue of Screen Education.
Once you have confirmation of the interviewee, as a team, devise a set of questions to ask your interviewee, which take into account the questions you began with and develop them further. Make sure that some of these questions are open ended and require more than yes or no answers. Who, what when, where, why and how questions are good to begin with. Also make lists of other footage you might make on location and elsewhere and devise a shooting schedule, with times, dates, locations, equipment and content descriptions of footage and/or images.

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Endnotes

i ‘Moments in Time’ was a series of micro documentaries broadcast on the ABC in 2002. The series was produced by Iain Knight and Paul Clarke.

ii ‘Nest’ was a series of short documentary portraits, about how people ‘feather their nests’ domestically, produced by Andrew Urban and screened on SBS in 2004.

iii ‘Hybrid Life’ was a series of 12 documentaries produced screened on SBS in 2001

iv SBS series ‘Tales from a Suitcase,’ produced by Will Davies, in 2002


vi The documentary on the women’s prison was part of the ABC series ‘Moments in Time’ (Knight and Clarke, 2002)

vii Who Killed Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler (Director, Peter Butt). Produced by Anna Grieve & Krystine Wyld, 2006) ABC.


ix ‘Stickball’ Production team: Cerrae Mitchell, Chris Killen, Michelle Miles; Heidi Irvine. This video was narrowcast online in the ‘Portable short film competition’ 2005.

x ‘To Get Rich is Glorious’ (Director, Nick Torrens, 1997), set in Hong Kong, follows the fortunes of a Hong Kong entrepreneur.

xi ‘Cosenza Vecchia’, (Director, David Pledger), in the SBS documentary series, *Hybrid Life*, 2001. A magical realist documentary, the story deals with memory history, migration and identity.

xii This documentary was broadcast on the ABC, 8:30pm Thursday, September 7, 2006