

Documentary Research—Com 231
Professor Lora Taub-Pervizpour
Fall 2005

Documenting Identity

*outside
outside myself
there is a world...*
-- William Carlos Williams

In documentary work, imagination encounters and tries to come to terms with reality; and the way in which that is done, the outcome achieved, is as various as the individuals involved in the effort, the struggle.

—Robert Coles, 1997, p. 267



Photo Credit: Salt Institute for Documentary Studies

Most people, at some time in life, find themselves recording and preserving significant experiences. These acts—compiling or interpreting a family photo album, discovering and writing down the history of a church or town, photographing a landscape in transition or a neighborhood in crisis, or even snapping photos at a graduation—range broadly, yet they share one important trait: the familiar impulse to document. We may want to preserve something for posterity, to acknowledge an accomplishment, to promote change, but always as we document we engage in something larger than ourselves, something beyond the confines of our singular lives. This connection is the beginning of understanding how documentary work fits naturally with community life.

—Tim Rankin, *Directory*, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University

Orientation of the Course

Welcome to Documentary Research. This is a course about doing documentary work. You will become documentarians, producers, recorders, and tellers of stories. Doing documentary work is much more than "recording facts." It is a reflexive process in which we confront what renowned documentarian Robert Coles calls the "moral underpinnings of social inquiry" (Coles, 1997, p. 6).

This semester, our explorations of documentary research will be shaped by the theme "identity," in connection with the Center for Ethics program "*The Ethics and Politics of Identity*." Each student will research a topic related to their own identity and produce a 2 minute digital documentary exploring the topic. On performance day, December 9, documentaries from all Documentary Research sections will be featured in a *Digital Storytelling Festival* for the campus community.

This course builds on the critical skills developed in Media & Society. In that course, you learned to look at the storytelling (and selling) institutions and systems of global mass media and communication critically and systematically. Here you will develop the tools to tell your own stories, to document and give voice to your ideas and interests. In this process, you will gain a deeper understanding of how media is made and the implicit and explicit ethical choices that shape media production. Thus, as it explores the link between media analysis and production, this course completes the foundation for further coursework in the major.

Documentary media cover a range of topics—from youth basketball (*Hoop Dreams*) to a town's response to a hate-crime (*Two Towns of Jasper*) to children growing up in the midst of war (*If the Mango Tree Could Speak*). Most documentaries share in common a mission to raise public awareness about important social matters. In this course, our focus is on the American tradition of social documentary, stories that give presence and voice to experiences that otherwise would not be heard in mainstream commercial media. As we look at case studies, we will explore the possibilities of documentary media to raise public awareness, the role of documentaries in community life, and consider the differences between documentary and other forms of media (especially journalism and reality television).

Finally, our inquiries will also focus on the increasing significance of digital technologies in doing documentary work. As commercial media provide less and less space for exhibiting documentary work, the Internet has become an alternative arena for sharing documentary media. How have digital technologies opened up traditions of documentary storytelling to communities? We will look at important sites of community-based digital storytelling, at the same time that students in this class produce their own rich stories about the lived experiences of identity.

Contact Information

My office is upstairs in Walson, room 200. You have several ways to communicate with me:

Office hours: Monday 12 p.m. – 2 p.m.; Tuesday 11 a.m. – 12 p.m.; Friday 10 a.m. – 11 a.m.; or by appointment.

Phone: x3880

Email: ltaub@muhlenberg.edu

Course website: <http://www.muhlenberg.edu/communication/taub/DocResearch>

Course blog: <http://docresearchfall05.blogspot.com/>

Objectives

Seven objectives guide this course. Our objectives are 1) to experience how your lives impact and shape the way you see problems, solutions, and questions about the social world; 2) to analyze the ethical and moral dimensions inherent in representing the lives of others; 3) to examine the formats, processes, and evidence we use to document and construct knowledge and understanding about the world around us; 4) to become skillful users of both print and electronic research tools; 5) to develop your written, oral and visual communication talents; 6) to establish a firm grounding in basic digital media production; 7) to sharpen the note taking and reading skills you need in future Communication classes; 8) to advance the liberal arts mission of the college by providing you with opportunities to develop the capacities of imagination and critical thinking that make possible humane and responsible living within a democratic society.

Required Texts

Coles, R. (1997). *Doing documentary work*. NY: Oxford.

Articles to be distributed in class.

Grading

Documentary Profile	10%
Essay & Revision	20%
Midterm Examination	20%
Digital Documentary Project	30%
Class Participation	20%

Students with documented disabilities or special needs requiring accommodations for this course should contact Academic Support Services, the Counseling Center, or Student Health Services. Please make these contacts as soon as possible so that we may have a dialogue as to your needs and the recommended accommodations. Requests for extended time for the midterm exam must be supported with documentation at least one full week prior to the exam date.

Assignments

Documentary Profile

In the second week of the semester, each student will produce a brief documentary profile of a classmate. The purpose of this assignment is to introduce you from the outset to some of the editorial and ethical challenges that emerge as you do documentary work, as you represent the life of another person. You will also experience what it feels like to have your own life represented by someone else.

Your documentary profile must include **a photograph** and **one single-spaced page** biography of your partner. As you will discover, a page is not much space for a life! You will need to make many choices about the story you are telling: What is most compelling about this person? What seems most important for others to know about this person? What makes this person unlike any other? Keep in mind: this is not the unedited, unabridged biography! It's a biographical profile, a story that documents something compelling about your classmate.

Each student will read and present their documentary profile in class on **Thursday, September 8**. Attendance for this group presentation is essential and required to receive full credit for the assignment.

Defining Documentary Essay & Revision

This is a writing intensive course. According to the College catalog, "A writing-intensive course is a regular academic course in which...students will complete a minimum of fifteen pages of writing broken into at least three assignments. One of these assignments must be a revision in response to the instructor's written comments" (College Catalog, p. 61). This assignment requires students to explore the complex meanings of documentary that unfold in course texts, most especially Coles' *Doing documentary work*. Detailed guidelines will be distributed in mid-October. This 5-page essay is due in class on **Thursday, November 3**. Graded essays, with my written comments and guidelines for revision will be turned back to you on or before **Tuesday, November 29**. Your revised essay is due during the scheduled final exam period for this course. **Note: both the essay and the revision are graded assignments and your overall essay grade will take into account evidence of significant and thoughtful revision efforts.**

Midterm Exam

A midterm exam will be given in class on **Tuesday, October 11**, testing your command of course readings--key concepts, people, and problems in documentary research. It will consist of multiple choice questions and brief identifications.

Documenting Identity Project

Each student will produce a 2 minute documentary that contributes to our collective efforts to explore the theme, "identity." Class discussions, readings, and videos will help you generate ideas for your project. A proposal for your project is due in class during the fifth week of the semester, on **Tuesday, September 27**. Guidelines for your proposal will be distributed in class.

While there are many formats for documentary work (text, video, audio, photographic...) we will be using techniques of digital storytelling to produce a 2 minute documentary story saved on CD Rom. The last weeks of the semester will be entirely dedicated to producing your digital stories. They are **due at the start of class on Thursday, December 8**, and we will view them in class together during our last class meetings. **Note: To receive full credit for this assignment, your story must be complete and ready for viewing by the deadline, and you must be present at the viewing.** Stories from all Documentary Research sections will be screened for the campus community in a digital storytelling festival on **Friday, December 9**, on performance day. Students are expected to be present for this festival highlighting your work.

Class Participation

More than attendance, your class participation grade also takes into consideration your preparedness for class and the quality of contributions you make to class discussion (in both real time and virtual blog space). More than 2 absences will negatively impact your grade. How should you prepare for class?

1. Do the assigned readings *before* class.
2. Take careful notes on your readings and bring your notes to class.
3. Mark key passages and be prepared to point to specific examples from the text(s) during class discussion.
4. Bring your thoughtful questions about the readings to class to raise during class discussion.
5. ALWAYS BRING YOUR READINGS TO CLASS. (I can't emphasize this enough).

Grading Ground Rules

To achieve the objectives of the course, and to pass, you must complete and pass all assignments. If you fail one of the requirements be aware that you have not passed the course. As you know, Muhlenberg uses a plus/minus grading system. 'A' grades are reserved for clearly outstanding work, which demonstrates not only a mastery of the content, but also an

ability to integrate, synthesize, and evaluate the material or questions under consideration. 'B' grades are reserved for work that is above average and demonstrates an ability to transfer and link individual concepts to other course material or relevant public events and life experiences. 'C' grades are assigned to work which meets all of the requirements for the assignment and demonstrates an ability to identify and define concepts relevant to the topic area. 'D' grades are assigned to work which is completed and submitted to the instructor but does not fully meet the requirements for the assignment. 'F' grades are assigned to severely negligent performances. Naturally, each higher grade must meet or surpass the standards established for the preceding grade.



Documentary work is closely connected to remembering, creating, and telling life stories and experiences. Most of us share a need to recall and reconsider local memory, to revisit and renew our connection to place. Out of shared telling and remembering grow identity, connection, and pride, binding people to a place and to one another... The documentary process, and sharing the results of that work, provides a way for us to acknowledge and shape community life as we advance our understanding of these connection and how they inform our work in the present.

—Tim Rankin, Directory of the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University

CLASS ROAD MAP
(unexpected detours may happen!)

Week 1
8/30-
9-1
to render a life

Day 1
Introduction and Overview

Day 2
Reading: Coles, introduction (pp. 1-18)

Week 2
9/6-
9/8
location

Day 1
No class—Labor Day

Day 2
Reading: Coles, Chapter 1 (pp. 19-32)
Documentary Profiles Presentation

Evening Lecture: Brenda Dixon Gottschild: Reading Race, Performing Race—Parameters and Potentials
7-8:30 Miller Forum, Moyer Hall

Week 3
9/13-
9/15
no ideas but in things

Day 1
Reading: Coles, Chapter 1 (pp. 33-48)

Day 2
Reading: Coles, Chapter 2 (pp. 49-75)

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 16
FIELDTRIP TO ELLIS ISLAND

Week 4
9/20-
9/22
moral and psychological tensions

Day 1
Reading: Coles, Chapter 2 (pp. 76-86)

Day 2
No class—Attend evening screening of *Banana Split: 25 Stories by Kip Fulbeck*, 7 p.m. Recital Hall, Center for the Arts

Week 5
9/27-
9/29
vocational hazards

Day 1
Reading: Coles, Chapter 3 (pp. 87-109)

Day 2
Project Proposals Due in Class
Evening lecture: Joshua Gamson: *Freaks Talk Back: Television and Sexual Nonconformity* 7:00pm, Recital Hall

Week 6
10/4-
10/6
fact and fiction

Day 1

Reading: Coles, Chapter 3 (pp. 110-127)

Day 2

No Class: Attend evening screening of *Juggling Gender*, 7 p.m. Recital Hall, Center for the Arts

Week 7
10/11-
10/13

Day 1

Midterm

Day 2

No Class: Fall Recess

Week 8
10/18-
10/20
defining
documentary work

Day 1

Reading: Coles, Chapter 3 (pp. 128-145)

Day 2

Reading: TBA

Week 9
10/25-
10/27
documenting history

Day 1

No class: Attend **evening lecture** by Eric Stange, Documentary Filmmaker, Executive Producer and Director of Spy Pond Productions <http://www.spypondproductions.com/index.htm>

Day 2

Guest: Eric Stange, Documentary Filmmaker

Readings: TBA

Week 10
11/1-
11/3
image as argument

Day 1

Reading: Coles, Chapter 4 (pp. 146-179)

Day 2

Photographs by Dorothea Lange

ESSAYS DUE IN CLASS

Week 11
11/8-
11/10
the documentary
impulse

Day 1

Reading: Coles, Chapter 4 (249-252) and selections to be distributed in class

Day 2

Introduction to digital storytelling

Week 12
11/15-
11/17
surfacing stories

Day 1
Digital storytelling lab

Day 2
Digital storytelling lab

Week 13
11/22-11/24
digital
storytelling

Day 1
Digital storytelling lab

Day 1
No Class: Thanksgiving

Week 14
11/29-12/1
digital
storytelling

Day 1 & Day 2
Digital storytelling lab

Evening Lecture: Craig Calhoun: *Cosmopolitanism and Belonging*
7:00pm, Miller Forum, Moyer Hall

Week 15
12/6-12/8
story circle

Day 1
Finishing touches

Day 2
STORIES DUE for class screening

December 9, PERFORMANCE DAY
Digital Story Festival
Location: TBA
11a.m. – 1 p.m.
Attendance required!