

Students as Modern Muckrakers: Creating Films for Social Change

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At the very heart of the *College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (“C3 Framework”) is the idea that students’ ideas matter, that they should have agency within their own learning, and that the work they do in social studies should prepare them for a meaningful and engaged civic life.¹ Most teachers we encounter feel the spirit of the C3 aligns with their professional ideals. At the same time, teachers sometimes feel overwhelmed by the reality of this challenge. In particular, teachers feel hesitant to share instructional decision-making with students and to allow space (and time) for students to take informed action. In this article, we unpack one practical, yet ambitious, method for addressing these challenges: filmmaking. We outline a project called *Speak Truth to Power* that asks students to enact social change through the dynamic medium of documentary film. We also outline a process that teachers might follow to reach all four dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc using documentary techniques authentic to the genre.

Speaking Truth to Power: A Modern Muckraking Experience

Since 2012, the *Speak Truth to Power* video competition, a project of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, has engaged students in creative storytelling to teach others about human rights violations. Students tackle issues that range from human trafficking and environmental activism to religious self-determination and political participation. In creating their videos, students choose one of the “Human Rights Defenders” (activists) identified by RFK Human Rights and create a 3- 5-minute video documentary on the relevant human rights violation, how the activist is trying to improve the situation, local connections that exist, and the larger lessons one can learn from the activist. Students have a great deal of flexibility in the human rights topic they choose and in how they approach the project. They may choose documentary,

stop motion, animation, digital photo essay or other genres that involve filmmaking components. In this way, teachers can leverage students’ creativity and academic curiosities as a way of increasing their agency within the inquiry.

The video contest is unique because the summative performance task also asks students to take informed action. By telling the stories of human rights activists, students become modern muckrakers spreading awareness of social issues alongside their defender. The video format makes it simple to share these projects with a wider audience and many of the videos have made an impact nationally. Each year, one video is selected to premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York while others are featured on the web or shared through social media. Student videos from the competition have also been used for specific advocacy projects including one that was sent

to over 100,000 union members as part of a women’s rights campaign. Another video was instrumental in garnering support for the development of an international anti-trafficking campaign. In the end, the video contest is more than an assignment; it is students taking action by producing content that can impact change in the world.

The contest also has a lasting impact on students. The project not only engages students in critical contemporary issues and the compelling stories of activists, it also gives them the digital documentary skills that will assist them in advocating for issues in the future and can be a starting point for participating in the work of creating a more just and peaceful world.

Helping Students Speak Truth to Power through Documentary Making

So where might teachers begin in helping students undertake their human rights investigation? How can teachers structure students’ in a way that aligns with all four dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc? In this section, we have provided a road map for getting started. Over the past decade, we have worked alongside teachers to create documentaries that help to animate inquiry in social studies. We outline below the four-phase process of research, documentary treatment, storyboard, and film production using the 2013 winning entry on sex trafficking.² For teachers seeking more guidance on

designing and facilitating student documentary projects with additional classroom examples and detailed evaluation rubrics, see Swan and Hofer, 2013a.³

Phase 1: Research

Documentary filmmakers learn about their subject through substantive and systematic research. In much the same way, students must build their background knowledge relative to their topic. Following the C3 Inquiry Arc's Dimensions 1 and 2, students should work to develop a compelling question that will anchor their exploration on their chosen topic (e.g., Can we ever end slavery?) and then supporting questions that will help structure their research (e.g., What is human trafficking? Where is trafficking most prevalent? Who is working to stop trafficking and how are they doing it?). Teachers should provide students time to examine these questions using political, economic, geographic, and historical perspectives to help them to develop substantive answers. For example, in exploring the compelling question, "Can we ever end slavery?", students can use the supporting questions to understand the geography of human trafficking by locating where people are forced into slavery and the economic circumstances that perpetuate the system. Students utilize a variety of disciplinary sources to answer these questions, like the United Nation's *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*, which examines the scope and movement of trafficked people as well as the economic impact of trafficking through data, maps, and textual information.⁴ In this way, students ground their documentary making in social studies content knowledge rather than diving directly into the technological aspects of the project.⁵

Phase 2: Documentary Treatment

Once students have researched their topic they can begin to develop the core message of their film, known as a "documentary treatment." The documentary treatment is used by professional documentarians to provide a vision and

Courtesy of RFK Human Rights



Students working on a documentary.

structure for their film and ultimately to secure funding for the project. In classrooms, we divide the documentary treatment into two sections: a documentary "pitch" and outline. Similar to the claim building work of Dimension 3 of the C3 Inquiry Arc, the pitch challenges students to articulate the main idea of the film in a compelling way. The pitch is intentionally persuasive and succinct—likened to an "elevator speech" for the film. The pitch of the anti-trafficking film used an issue-based narrative structure by placing the audience in the center of a modern-day tragedy—sex trafficking:

This film is about the "Hydra" of the modern day sex trade. The film examines the varied, connected, and complex causes of the trade, who is working to eradicate it, and why it continues. Ultimately, the viewer must decide, "Can we ever end slavery?"

Students then start from the pitch to create an outline, or scene-by-scene overview for the film. In the documentary treatment phase, students not only develop the outline for the introduction, body, and resolution, they also identify evidence with which to anchor their claims. For example, in the sex-trafficking film, students interviewed a modern day abolitionist and used footage from that interview to support their core message that the modern sex trade is like the many-headed serpent in Greek mythology, the Hydra. The students included supporting evidence from their research that helped viewers understand the economic and political complexity of solving the problem.

Phase 3: Storyboard

Once students have developed the pitch and outline for their film, they can begin to consider how to tell the story through the filmmaking genre—what our documentary colleague, Sharon Zuber, calls "writing with light."⁶ Writing with light is a literal translation of the word, "photography," which suggests that filmmaking is a new form of writing that creates both a verbal and visual experience for the viewer. This can be a challenging, but engaging aspect of filmmaking as students are asked to present their ideas as a visual story, not just to convey an argument. Through a written or digital storyboard, students select and sequence images and references to any audio or visual effects, as well as develop a script for any voice-over narration.

Photo by Eadie Adams/Courtesy of RFK Human Rights



Juliana Dogbadzi, who escaped from captivity in Ghana.

Storyboarding connects to the C3 Inquiry Arc in important ways by encouraging students to use a variety of disciplinary sources, including visual and multimedia sources, and to use these sources in illustrative ways. In the sex trafficking film, the students used still images of Juliana Dogbadzi, who escaped from captivity in Ghana, video footage of classroom deliberations, and interviews of those who are working to eradicate the trade. Additionally, they

used student narration, footage of themselves, and neighborhood screen shots to create empathy for those victims featured in their film. To create structure for the film, they strategically used key questions on a simple black screen to invite the viewer into the core dilemma of the film, “Can we ever end slavery?”

Phase 4: Film Production

A well-developed storyboard prepares students for the final phase of the process: film production. In the production process, students use a video production application (e.g., *iMovie*, *Windows Live MovieMaker*) to bring the elements of the storyboard to life in the final film. We suggest that rather than having students begin the project with the filmmaking software, teachers structure a project so that students are working with the moviemaking software at the end of the project after they have developed the storyboard. In this way, students are focused on the content of and meaning of the film and postpone the often distracting (but engaging and important!) elements of filmmaking (e.g., how slowly should I pan over this image? When should the music fade in and out?). The aesthetic choices students make are certainly important, but we have found that they can often eclipse the content of the film and can lead to films that lack substance if introduced too early in the development process.⁷

Once completed, the films can then be shared first through a classroom screening—we call this the “rough cut.” The rough cut is a time for students to garner feedback from other classmates so they can make revisions for greater impact. Once students do a final rendering, they can submit their film to the *Speak Truth to Power* competition, which accepts entries by February or March of each year.⁸

The key aspects of Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework are realized in the film production phase. At the end of the Inquiry Arc, students are asked to communicate their conclusions to inquiries in multi-modal ways and to a vari-

ety of audiences outside the classroom. Additionally, they are asked to critique these conclusions to deepen their understanding and to improve their ideas. But where the magic really happens in social studies and what we tried to capture in the C3 Framework, is the crescendo of academic inquiry towards action. The *Speak Truth to Power* competition allows students to animate all four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc culminating in taking informed action. That is, to understand the causes of regional and global problems, assess the options for individual and collective action, and then act in ways that allow students to demonstrate civic agency in a real-world context.⁹

Filmmaking for Social Change

In a speech that Eleanor Roosevelt once gave, in 1958, she said,

Where, after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.¹⁰

Ultimately, students who participate in the *Speak Truth to Power* competition have the experience of answering Roosevelt’s question—“Where, after all, do human rights begin?”—in the small, but important space of the social studies classroom as they learn about injustice and to stand up for others. In this way, students learn to appreciate both the cinematic and academic value of film-

making, but most importantly, its civic value. 🌍

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Available online: www.socialstudies.org/c3; Kathleen Swan and Susan Griffin, “Beating the Odds: The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards,” *Social Education* 77 no. 6 (2013): 317–321; Kathleen Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, “C3 Instructional Shifts,” *C3 Teachers*. Available online: www.c3teachers.org/c3shifts/
2. Video of the 2013 winning entry on sex trafficking, <https://youtu.be/L8TapEQYQCQ>.
3. Kathleen Swan and Mark Hofer, *And Action! Doing Digital Documentaries in the Social Studies Classroom* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013a).
4. UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014* (New York, N.Y.: United Nations publication), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/GLOTIP_2014_full_report.pdf.
5. See note 3 above.
6. Mark Hofer, Kathleen Swan, and Sharon Zuber. “Teaching Social Studies Students to Write with Light in the Documentary Filmmaking Process,” *Social Education* 78, no. 3 (2014): 131–137.
7. Kathleen Swan, Mark Hofer, and Gerry Swan, “Examining Authentic Intellectual Work with a Social Studies Digital Documentary Inquiry Project in a Mandated State-Testing Environment,” *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education* 27, no. 3 (2011): 115–122; Kathleen Swan and Mark Hofer, “Examining Student-Created Documentaries as a Mechanism for Engaging Students in Authentic Intellectual Work,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 41, no. 1 (2013b): 133–175.
8. For more information about the Speak Truth to Video contest, www.speaktruthvideo.com
9. Marshall Croddy and Peter Levine, “The C3 Framework: A Powerful Tool for Preparing Future Generations for Informed and Engaged Civic Life,” *Social Education* 78, no. 6, 282–285; See note 1 for NCSS (2013); Swan, Lee, Grant (2014).
10. Eleanor Roosevelt, Remarks to the United Nations, New York, N.Y., March 27, 1958.

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