

"Taking Time to Tell the Story"

A course on long-format documentary radio production
For U.C. Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, Radio Program
© Claire Schoen

The Course:

This 15-week course will require each student to produce a half-hour audio documentary for distribution on public/community radio. The class will proceed through the steps of researching, designing, recording, writing and editing needed to create an engaging radio program based on a coherent thesis with high production values.

Requirements for this course include a basic level of competence in recording technique and non-linear editing, along with some experience in how to find and tell a story in sound. Over the weeks, students will gain substantial experience in all stages of production as well as in the art of storytelling.

Compelling audio documentary incorporates a creative weave of elements including narration, interviews, music, vérité scenes, character portraits, dramatizations, performances, archival tape, and ambience beds. Students will learn to paint a picture in sound by employing a number of these elements in their own work. While the style of a documentary is important, an even greater emphasis will be put on structure. Students will learn how to tell their story through a clear, unfolding treatment of their subject. They will learn to create a "dramatic" structure that takes the listener through introduction, development and resolution of the story. And they will learn how character development allows the listener to identify with the people telling the story.

Emphasis will be placed on collaboration, particularly during location recording and editing. Critique and analysis by the group will be built into the curriculum. However, each student will be responsible for his or her own finished product.

Completed documentaries may be broadcast on the University radio station, KALX and/or other local public radio stations. Successful pieces may also be given a national broadcast on the series, "Making Contact." This weekly, half-hour program is distributed to over 200 (primarily college and community) radio stations around the country. "Making Contact" is produced by the National Radio Project in Oakland California. Senior Producer, Tena Rubio, has taken a number of finished pieces created in this class during previous semesters. All of the pieces in the class will also be offered to radio stations nationally over the Public Radio Exchange (PRX). (These documentaries will take an evergreen approach to their subjects rather than reporting on current events, so they will maintain their timeliness for broadcast over a period of months or even years.) Students will also learn about reversioning in order to distribute features drawn from their longer piece. And they will leave the course with a polished portfolio piece.

Documentary film is enjoying an unprecedented renaissance in theaters and on television today. Documentary radio is beginning to gain a similar recognition. Working in the documentary format will give students the opportunity to delve deeply into a subject and take the time to "show not tell" their stories. Creating sound portraits in this manner, students will learn how to inspire their listeners to care about the people and become involved in the ideas behind the story.

The Curriculum:

The curriculum for this course will follow the steps necessary for producing long-format documentary. This structure will give students time to address each aspect of the process in a thorough manner.

The classes themselves will include lectures covering both technical and theoretical points. There will also be ample time for questions and discussion. Excerpts of successful documentaries will be played to demonstrate various techniques and styles as they are discussed. Entire documentaries will also be assigned as listening homework to give students as much exposure as possible to a wide range of documentary work. Students' own work-in-progress will be presented in-class for group critique. Students will also break down into smaller groups to help define and evaluate each others' work.

While emphasis is given to production and listening, background reading will also be suggested. This may include Jonathan Kern's "Sound Reporting", Tod Maffin's "The Story: Finding and Telling a Winning Radio Story" and Sheila Curran

Bernard's "Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers." (Relevant chapters include research; pitch and proposal writing; outlines, treatments and scripts; structure; manipulating time and writing narration.

Topics to be covered in this course include the following:

I. Planning a radio documentary

- Writing for radio
 - Every stage of a radio production includes writing. An overview of the different types of writing employed throughout production will be presented at the outset of the course.
- Format
 - Structuring an audio documentary
 - Style and elements
 - Creative use of the "NPR clock"
- Content
 - Discussing the theme for the class' series
 - Finding topics for individual projects

II. Preproduction

- Research
 - Print, people and on-line sources
 - Informational interviews
 - Creating a content outline
- Finding your central story and characters
 - Developing interview questions
 - Finding story elements
- Developing a story treatment

III. Production

- Recording
 - Learning to handle your equipment
 - Different microphones and their applications
 - Mic'ing techniques
 - Recording techniques
- The art of the interview
 - Controlling the interview. When to let your subject take the lead
 - Tricks for getting full sentences, making your subject comfortable, etc.
- Beyond the interview
 - Recording vérité scenes

Storytelling
Ambience and FX
Recording events and presentations
Archival material

IV. Post Production

- Organizing your material
 - Logging vs. transcripts
 - Archiving your tape
- Scripting your piece
 - Building a script around your best tape
 - Show-not-tell vs. Ax-n-trax
- Narration
 - Writing interesting narration.
 - What to use narration for (and when not to use it)
- Linear editing on the computer
 - ProTools or Soundtrack Pro
 - Editing basics and editing tricks
- Editing style and structure
 - Cut, write, cut, write, cut, write
 - Creating a vérité scene
 - Creative use of dramatizations, performances, archival tape, music, etc
- Mixing
 - Using tracks effectively
 - Rich, layered sound beds that don't muddy the water
 - Fades, EQ, volume, etc.
 - Finishing the piece

V. Getting your work heard

- Polishing and formatting programs for "Making Contact"
- Putting your work up on PRX
- Independent distribution nuts-n-bolts
- Reversioning long-format into features for secondary markets

The Teacher:

For the past twenty-five years I have been involved in media production, working on a wide variety of documentary, educational and corporate projects. As a producer/director, I have created numerous radio features ranging from five to

fifteen minute pieces for the public radio magazines, to over 130 two-minute segments for CBS radio. I have also self-distributed a number of my independently produced radio programs. My related audio work includes sound recording, design and editing on documentary movies; audio tours; sound design for theater; and educational cassettes. My first years in media were as an independent film producer and a post-production assistant on feature films.

While my experience in various media formats is extensive, my true love and greatest accomplishments have been in long-format radio documentary. I have produced over 20 half-hour or hour-long audio documentaries for national and/or international distribution. These pieces have garnered several awards for "best documentary" including an NFCB Golden Reel (*Voices in Exile*), an NFCB Silver Reel (*What's Left?*), two Gracies (*Imagining York* and *Heart-to-Heart*) and two Clarion awards (*Imagining York* and *Heart-to-Heart*). I have also shared in both a Peabody and a DuPont-Columbia (for producing one hour in *The DNA Files* series).

Documentaries open a window onto the lives of everyday people; weaving their stories into a narrative whole.. To this end, I have worked with individuals from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, from undocumented Salvadoran immigrants (*Voices in Exile*), to Russians living in Soviet-era Moscow (*Distant Neighbors*), to Blacks and Jews working together in the Civil Rights movement (*Can You Hear Me?*). The issues covered in my work include nuclear proliferation, physical disability, communications technology, genetic engineering, urban greenbelts and care-giving for the dying, to name just a few.

I recently completed *Green Rush*, an hour-long radio documentary about the economics of alternative energy. This project was produced for national distribution as a commission by American RadioWorks (American Public Media). Other recent radio projects include: *The Undiscovered Explorer: Imagining YORK*, an hour-long documentary, produced for Oregon Public Broadcasting which was distributed to over 180 stations nationally; and *Heart-to-Heart; Caring for the Dying*, a series of three hour-long audio documentaries which were distributed on over 150 stations nationwide, along with on-going CD distribution.

Websites for these programs are at:

<<<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/greenrush/>>>

<<www.opb.org/programs/york>> and

<<www.hearttoheartradio.org>>.

Earlier work includes *Mad River: Hard Times in Humboldt County*, an hour-long documentary film about the perceived conflict between jobs and the environment.

Produced for PBS, this documentary enjoyed a national primetime distribution on TV and 10 years of educational distribution.

I have taught radio scriptwriting and production in a number of capacities. I was the "new producer trainer" for *The Osgood File*. I have lectured on documentary scriptwriting Third Coast International Audio Festival, Film Arts Foundation, U.C. Extension and at several high schools. I have mentored students from the Association of Independents in Radio, the ExPression Center for New Media and others venues. And I work as a story consultant for independent producers.

My studio in Berkeley, California includes a full-production digital audio editing and mix facility running Digidesign's ProTools. I have state-of-the-art portable audio equipment (Sound Devices 722 recorder, and Neumann, Schoeps, Sennheiser and Tram mics) for location recording.