

Voices through Water

The Creative and Activist Methodologies Toolkit

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Film/Audio documentary: Message to Your Best Friend

Artistic, Advocacy, Activist



This activity invites participants to create a brief documentary-style message to their best friend about a specific place or situation. By framing observations as a personal message, participants develop a storytelling approach that balances journalistic reporting with a personal perspective, resulting in a video or audio piece of 2-3 minutes in length.

We used this method to reflect about our travels during the project, reflect about our feelings and observations and practise sharing them with others.



Target group

Young people; media students, content creators, journalists, or anyone interested in documentary storytelling

Min. 1- max. 20 participants (can be done individually or in small groups of 2-3 people)



Time needed

1.5-2 hours



Environment

Any environment – can be completed on site or prepared in the classroom prior to recording



Materials

- Smartphones or cameras for video recording
- Notebooks, pens and pads for scripting
- Optional: Basic editing apps on phones

Objective/aim

- Develop skills in observational storytelling and documentary techniques
- Practice balancing objective reporting with personal perspective
- Explore documentary as a tool for sharing observations and as an inspiring action

Step by step instructions

Step 1 - Introduction

10 minutes

- Explain the concept: creating a documentary message for a close friend
- Briefly discuss balancing factual reporting with personal reaction

Step 2 - Location/Topic Selection & Script Development

20 minutes

- Participants quickly identify a place, situation, or issue to document
- Create a simple outline including:
 - Where they are and what they are observing
 - Key facts about the place/situation
 - Personal reactions
 - Possible solutions or next steps (if applicable)

Step 3 - Technical Tips

5 minutes

Basic recording tips for smartphone video/audio:

- Hold your phone horizontally (landscape) unless you specifically need vertical footage.
- Natural light is your friend - position yourself so light falls on your subject's face, not behind them.
- Get as close to your subject as possible - phone mics work best within 3-6 feet.
- Shoot in the highest resolution your phone offers and always start with a full battery and plenty of storage space. Bring a power bank for longer shoots.
- A reminder about ethical considerations when filming in public:

Consent and Transparency - Always identify yourself as a filmmaker and explain your project when approaching people. Avoid filming people in vulnerable situations even if they're in public.

Cultural Sensitivity - Research local customs and cultural norms before filming. What's acceptable in one community may be offensive in another.

Step 4 - Recording/Filming

45 minutes

- Participants go to their chosen locations (ideally nearby)
- Record their documentary messages (aim for 2-3 minutes final length)
- Capture any supporting footage/audio

Step 5 - Review and Basic Assembly

30 minutes

Return to the meeting space

- Review footage and select the best takes
- Simple arranging of material (minimal editing)

Step 6 - Sharing & Reflection

10 minutes

- Watch/listen to the created documentaries
- Brief discussion on effectiveness and potential applications



Tips for the trainer

- Choose a location with several interesting documentary possibilities nearby
- Emphasise that technical perfection is less important than storytelling
- For an even tighter schedule, have participants work in couples where one films while the other one speaks
- Suggest having a simple structure: introduction, 3 key observations, personal reaction, conclusion
- Remind participants that shorter is often better - aim for clarity and impact
- Be mindful of filming people who may be experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, or other difficult circumstances.
- Just in case, make sure you have enough space to store your recorded material. Keep an eye on the weather and any sudden changes.



Comment

The short version of this activity emphasises spontaneity and instinctive storytelling over elaborate production. The time constraints help participants focus on the most important elements of their message rather than getting lost in perfectionism. The resulting short documentaries are often characterised by an engaging immediacy that lends itself well to social media and quick communication.



Alternative

Online implementation:

- Have participants document their immediate surroundings or a space visible from their windows
- Use video conferencing breakout rooms for small group planning
- Create screen recordings with voice-over for participants who prefer not to film physical spaces
- Share drafts of scripts in collaborative documents before recording
- Use a digital shared folder for submitting finished pieces
- During the sharing phase, use screen sharing to present the documentaries
- For reflection, create a digital feedback form in addition to verbal discussion



Source

Adapted from rapid documentary techniques used in mobile journalism training by Ivona Remundová