

Nonfiction Video Practice as Twenty-First-Century Liberal Education: The ASPIRE Experiment at UCLA

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IN MAY 2013, AN ACQUAINTANCE who worked as an administrator on undergraduate education initiatives at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), e-mailed me to ask how his unit might go about resourcing and teaching documentary production classes. He had just participated in a meeting with a film producer and social philanthropist named Peter Samuelson, who was pitching an idea he called the Academy for Social Purpose in Responsible Entertainment (ASPIRE) to deans and administrators from UCLA's liberal arts college.¹ ASPIRE was to be a nonprofit entity that provided funding and subject experts to universities to develop curricula in media production for social change in concert with the needs of local advocacy organizations, and Samuelson wanted UCLA to be the first ASPIRE partner. At the time, I was completing a doctorate in communication

at the University of California, San Diego, and took my colleague's e-mail inquiry as an opportunity to craft a postdoctoral position very well suited to my skill set in social documentary production and research interests in critical media pedagogy.² Samuelson had already raised the funds for a successful summer enrichment program at UCLA for high school-aged foster youth, and administrators from the Division of Undergraduate Education at the meeting saw a partnership with ASPIRE as a way to create media-based capstones and service learning opportunities for upperclassmen from across the college.³ But this idea was not universally embraced across different academic units at UCLA. Some pointed out that UCLA's School of Theater, Film, and Television already offered a documentary production track within its curriculum. If the university wanted to expand socially engaged production offerings, would it not be more productive for administration to direct funds to the school that already had the facilities, clout, and professional expertise in place to teach filmmaking?

Although I deeply respect the intricacies entailed in training professional filmmakers, my answer to this question after two years of leading ASPIRE at UCLA from within the Division of Undergraduate Education is an emphatic no. I argue here for conceptualizing media production on social issues as an activity that can foster deep, interdisciplinary learning experiences ideally suited for *students in liberal arts majors* who do not intend to pursue careers as media professionals. Through my case study, I aim to bring evidence to bear on an under-ac-

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knowledge synergy between current theories of liberal education and possibilities for social engagement latent in introductory film/video production pedagogy.⁴ I show that making use of inexpensive digital technologies to teach nonprofessional, nonfiction models of media practice to students across many disciplines for potential use in wide-ranging careers fills a void in liberal education without encroaching on the professional production training best left to film schools.

Liberal education is “at a crossroads,” in the terms of Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), the leading national policy initiative of the 1,300 US colleges and universities that constitute the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).⁵ Historically, liberal education focused on expanding individual student knowledge through non-vocational, abstract learning in the social sciences, natural sciences, arts, and humanities. But citing “searing evidence that study in many majors actually depresses students’ interest in active citizenship,” LEAP now proposes a vision for twenty-first-century liberal education that happens to overlap a great deal with the project-based approach taken in film/video production courses (AAC&U, *College Learning* 38; Schneider). LEAP calls on “policy leaders to expand substantially the investment in active, hands-on, collaborative, and inquiry-based forms of teaching and learning—making full use of new educational technologies” at every stage of university education (AAC&U, *College Learning* 11).

I see this update to the vision of liberal education as an opening that scholars/media makers can and should claim. Many existing departments in film and television were founded at a time when media production equipment was proportionally far more expensive than it is today. Teaching media production required a division, department, or school to manage access to valuable resources. Film departments tended to focus training on cinematic storytelling without an emphasis on particular social issues. Now restrictions on numbers of students learning media-making has less to

do with the cost of cameras and computers than it does with the difficulties of institutional reorganization. The ubiquity of digital media in students’ everyday lives, moreover, underlines the importance of exposing all students to socially and politically engaged media practices and challenging cinematic forms while they are in college. LEAP reports written between 2005 and 2015, in fact, provide a compelling set of arguments for film production faculty to use in conversations with the growing number of administrators who wish to create opportunities for students to grapple with “the world of unscripted problems” through hands-on, off-campus learning experiences (AAC&U, *College Learning* 1–73; AAC&U, *LEAP Challenge* 1–12; Schneider).

Framing ASPIRE as a new experiment in interdisciplinary, practice-based, socially engaged media literacy education for liberal arts undergraduates, my colleagues in undergraduate education and I won administrative approval to proceed with a three-year pilot at UCLA. We started in the spring of 2014 with a twenty-four-student seminar in disability studies and urban planning titled Documentary Production for Social Change: Mobility in Los Angeles, which centered entirely on the commutes of UCLA students, faculty, and staff as an angle on environmental sustainability and social justice in transit access. Although I focus the bulk of my analysis in this article on the teaching of the first course, I want to first touch briefly on broader outcomes of our first four quarters at UCLA, which included a second iteration of the Mobility class and a new, two-quarter course called Diasporic Nonfiction: Media Engagements with Memory and Displacement, cross-listed in African American studies and Chicana/o studies in the winter and spring of 2015. Anonymous evaluations for courses across 2014–15, with 72 percent of students participating, averaged combined ratings of 8.7/9 for the classes overall and 8.9/9 for “learning something of value,” with 100 percent recommending that the university offer more of such courses (around two-thirds used exclamation points!).

In spring 2014, my focus in this article, four of twenty-four students called the class “life changing” or “the best course I’ve taken at UCLA,” in large part because they felt that their work had contributed something meaningful to local social justice causes with which they came to identify personally. Students have collaborated on documentaries about LA-based organizations advocating for fair representation of black construction workers on public job sites, undocumented students, active transit, childhood obesity prevention, urban agriculture, Latina food truck vendors, community arts, and students with disabilities. Many of the organizations depicted by the student filmmakers now use the videos in their own community meetings and public outreach campaigns. Making the films catalyzed student involvement in social movements in some cases. Twelve students subsequently pursued social documentary projects as independent studies with me, including seven who won fellowships from the University of California–wide Global Food Initiative. These students have since completed whiteboard advocacy videos for the Urban School Food Alliance on national policy initiatives to improve school food, featured on the group’s website starting in mid-2015 (“Leveling the Eating Field: Meet the Filmmakers”). Multiple students who entered the course with vague filmmaking ambitions left with a desire rather to pursue a career in a social justice field. Overall, such sentiments directly overlap with the “essential learning outcomes” envisioned for liberal education in LEAP reports released as recently as 2015 (AAC&U, *LEAP Challenge* 9–10).⁶

The process at the center of these classes aims to model what education theorist Patricia Hill Collins termed “visionary pragmatism.” Collins’s theory adapts pragmatist ideas on “learning by doing” so as to foreground categories including race, gender, and class as institutions that perpetuate structural inequalities. Teachers who embrace visionary pragmatism, she explained, “believe in taking principled stances that should guide behavior” while keeping in mind that “every-

day life is something that is rooted, grounded, contingent, dynamic, and holistic . . . characterized by infinite [pragmatic] opportunities to engage in critical analysis and take action” (178). Whereas civics-oriented learning activities in the late nineteenth-century pragmatist schools included candle-making, masonry, carpentry, and cooking,⁷ Collins’s approach for twenty-first-century students mostly centers on dialogues about media representations and power in everyday life. Other media theorists have observed that the democratic potential of digital media means little without a sustained commitment to democratic ideals in social interactions and to equity in public institutions (Trend 2–4; Buckingham 11–19; Buckingham and Willett 93–114; Booker 209–31; Fuchs and Sandoval 1–6). I strongly agree that qualities of equity and inclusion can be practiced in classes on issue-based, collaborative media-making in ways inaccessible to the individual who consumes entertainment media online or at home. Participating with other students from diverse majors and socioeconomic backgrounds on socially engaged, nonfiction media projects, as numerous critical media theorists have argued, can facilitate deep thinking about the power dynamics between cameraperson and documentary subject, activist and social problem, film and viewer, and fellow students within a class, while developing *critical* media literacy where students may otherwise have seen only commercial and industrial media products (Tyner and Goodman; Cartwright; MacDougall 264–73; Hammer 33–85; Goldfarb 2–6; Collins 169–74; Sharma 36–54; Vaughan; Winston, Vanstone, and Chi). It is no accident, in my view, that Collins mentioned documentary filmmaking as a particularly promising *process* through which to explore new visions for democracy in education (173). The remainder of this article reflects on one approach to following Collins’s lead, with detail about assignments, teaching sessions, equipment, timing, failures, and successes that may be helpful to any who might like to try something similar in their own institution.

The ASPIRE Experiment at UCLA

The course Documentary Production for Social Change: Mobility in Los Angeles aimed to contribute to campus-wide sustainability efforts spearheaded by an initiative called UCLA Grand Challenges.⁸ The UCLA campus had taken up President Obama's call to address the imminent effects of climate change by committing research funding to the theme "Thriving in a Hotter Los Angeles: Achieving 100% Sustainability in Energy, Water, and Biodiversity by 2050." Faculty and administrators from across the campus enfolded their teaching and research into this project. One strand of this work focused on increasing bike, public transit (train and bus), car-pool, pedestrian, and van-pool commuting to UCLA. UCLA Transportation releases a *State of the Commute* report annually that publishes statistics about the mode of travel that various UCLA affiliates use to come to the campus. Compared to Los Angeles County as a whole, where 73 percent of commuters drive single-occupancy vehicles to work, UCLA is doing well. Only 51 percent of employees and 25 percent of students drove alone to campus in 2013. Nonetheless, this still entailed an average of over 100,100 car trips per day, an unsustainable number in the long term (UCLA Transportation 3). UCLA does not have more land to build parking spaces, but there are still plans to continue increasing the number of enrolled students. Over 42,000 students attended UCLA in 2013, a 6 percent increase from 2008 (5). Adding in over 5,000 faculty and academic staff and 23,500 other staff employees, UCLA's campus population swells to around 71,000 (5).

Addressing the problems of moving that many people without cars requires a multi-pronged, collaborative commitment to structural change in culture, habits, housing policy, land use, and transit infrastructure. Campus leaders such as environmental health scientist Richard Jackson argue that promoting active modes of transit instead of car travel addresses environmental and public health issues simultaneously. Integrating walking and biking into everyday travel behavior significantly reduces

obesity rates and hypertension, two of the most damaging chronic conditions in the United States ("Alternative Transportation and Your Health"). At the same time, community activists of color have strongly critiqued redevelopment policies that fund bicycle and train infrastructure without taking adequate measures to prevent displacement through the provision of affordable housing and sustainable jobs for longtime neighborhood residents. Critics see the forces of gentrification and displacement, even if they are caused by well-intentioned greenhouse gas reduction efforts or health promotion policies, as a breach of social justice principles.⁹ Many of these policies, moreover, do not necessarily address the needs of commuters with physical disabilities. Grappling with tensions and synergies across these strains of thought centrally informed course assignments, which focused on the commutes of UCLA students, faculty, and staff. The videos produced by students in the course were meant to be tools for making certain aspects of transportation and planning challenges both visible and visceral.

Recruiting an interdisciplinary group of UCLA students to take a time-intensive seminar class, though important to addressing the LEAP critique of departmental silos, required a good deal of administrative work. Administrators in undergraduate education were invaluable in navigating the bureaucracies at UCLA to find classroom space, departments for course listings, and students and to work out special event logistics and financial accounting for ASPIRE activities at UCLA. Students must fulfill a number of requirements for their respective majors, and since the regular fee hikes and tuition increases began in 2008, many students have taken on heavier course loads and longer hours at part-time jobs. They have limited time and flexibility to take electives. My administrator-colleagues found ways for the course to count toward requirements across numerous departments and minors. Undergraduates in the urban planning, disability studies, and labor and workplace studies minors could take the course as their capstone,¹⁰ and students in

the communication studies and world arts and cultures/dance majors could count it toward a practicum requirement. We e-mailed the course description to student affairs officers to distribute to majors in anthropology, sociology, African American studies, Chicana/o studies, and design/media arts.

I also worked with academic advisers to encourage applications from undergraduates in the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), a unit that advocates for students from historically underrepresented groups at UCLA.¹¹ Nearly all AAP students are the first in their families to attend college, and some are recent immigrants to the United States. A number of AAP students who could not afford to live near UCLA, which is located in an affluent neighborhood of West Los Angeles, expressed especially strong opinions about commuting issues in their applications to the course. These students had years of experience navigating Los Angeles by bus, bike, and car.

In addition, we sent a press release through the UCLA homepage about the pilot, which was picked up and featured by the campus newspaper, the *Daily Bruin*. All of this outreach work led to a number of positive outcomes. Students were asked to send a résumé and two-paragraph statement to apply; for twenty spots, we received over fifty undergraduate and ten graduate student applications from twenty-four majors. Equipment, space, and time limitations allowed us to enroll twenty-four students. They included seventeen different majors, ten students from the AAP program described previously, two graduate students who brought valuable knowledge sets to the classroom, and three undergraduate staff members of the *Daily Bruin* who had learned of the course from their colleague who wrote the story. The *Bruin* students were interested in pursuing careers in investigative journalism and became particularly important leaders of two of the group projects as the quarter progressed. Most students had no prior experience in studio courses or video production.

The class met on Tuesdays and Thursdays across ten weeks for three-hour sessions in

the afternoon, using roughly one of the week's sessions for technical training and the other for discussing readings and screenings of both professional work and rough cuts of student projects.¹² Using ASPIRE funds (around \$20,000), I purchased thirteen Canon Vixia kits with brackets, Beachtek audio adapters, external Rode shotgun microphones, and Sennheiser radio mics, as well as GoPro wearable cameras, an assortment of mounts, and external USB 3.0/Thunderbolt hard drives. By purchasing consumer-grade cameras, I was able to include professional sound equipment and the GoPro kits for pairs of students in the course while staying within budget. Students checked out the equipment for the duration of the quarter and were expected to return complete kits at its conclusion. Most, though not all, did this adequately. Media services personnel would better manage this checkout process, but such infrastructure simply was not in place. This limitation did influence purchasing decisions. Losing or breaking one or two of these cameras at \$300 each, though aggravating, would not be debilitating for future courses given our budget. For character-focused, observational shooting, I felt it more important to include high-quality radio mics in these kits than more expensive cameras. And the consumer-grade video equipment was well suited to the learning goals of the program and the course.

Editing occurred in Mac-based computer classrooms that were equipped with Adobe Premiere CS 6.0 and were accessible through the college library to the general student population. As the instructor of the course, I was able to reserve these facilities for three hours per week for instruction; they otherwise were available from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. during weekdays for students to use on their own. Students could also check out one of six hundred Mac laptops with Adobe CS for up to eight hours at a time at several libraries across the UCLA campus or plug their hard drives into faster desktop computer stations at the library. I was able to reserve a "laptop cart" on select days for overnight checkout of up to sixteen laptops. Several

students who owned their own laptops or computers downloaded the trial version of the Adobe Creative Suite for the last month of the quarter and completed substantial editing work at home. In short, students had many ways to access the editing tools needed to complete their projects. Students shared selected files through a Google Drive forum created especially for the course and uploaded rough cuts of their work to this site for in-class screening and discussion, thus eliminating the need for DVD output, DV decks, or copying to a shared hard drive during class time.

Over the course of the quarter, students had to complete three production assignments. Each assignment was subdivided into multiple parts to scaffold student learning and help them develop more complex thinking about expressing ideas through moving images and sound. Every student made a portrait of a space; pairs collaborated on a short documentary about the commuting experience of a UCLA student, faculty member, or staffer; and groups of five to seven then created an eight- to fifteen-minute documentary that combined several commuter portraits into longer films about a particular commuting issue.¹³ Additionally, the course required each student to develop a relationship with a community organization, campus group, cultural producer, and/or activist focused on commuting issues as the students worked on their videos. These relationships were meant to inform student work and deepen their understanding of key issues from the perspectives of longtime stakeholders. I hoped that some of the videos they made would become useful tools for the organizations and individuals who provided insights, an intention upon which I reflect further at the end of this section.

Technical instruction tailored to assignments took up the Thursday class sessions across the first seven weeks and followed student project directions in the final three weeks of the ten-week quarter. In week one, I led students in a general overview of the camera and tripod, introducing and explaining the mechanics of focus, shutter speed, aperture, and white bal-

ance in our digital cameras and touching on composition, depth of field, camera angle, tilt, and pan. Students then had time to try out these techniques via a “scavenger hunt” in the space surrounding the classroom. Over the weekend, each student planned and recorded a one- to two-minute silent, in-camera portrait of a space composed entirely of tripod shots, considering shot composition, duration, and sequence to tell a story or convey a mood. We screened and discussed these videos together on Tuesday of week two, a session designed to cultivate students’ comfort in speaking about moving images while also getting to know one another. In the Thursday session, I explained the layout of Premiere Pro and went through importing, dragging clips to a sequence, deleting synch sound, adding an ambient sound track, layering additional sounds, and then exporting a finished sequence. We finished the class with a basic demonstration of how to record and monitor sound using the shotgun mic, headphones, and the Vixia, and students were issued GoPro kits with which to experiment as they saw fit. Over the next week, they returned to their space to record sound for the in-camera portraits and to record several additional movement shots with the GoPro. They were then required to add in GoPro shots and ambient tracks timed to picture, layer four to six sounds onto additional sound tracks, and export their final sequences to our Google Drive site for viewing in half of the Thursday session of week three and the Tuesday session of week four.¹⁴ Editing these materials into the silent portraits served as students’ practical introduction to Adobe Premiere.

In the second project (weeks three to six), pairs of students collaborated on a three- to five-minute portrait of a UCLA commuter. They first shot and edited an observational video of their subject, drawing from a screening and discussion of Frederick Wiseman’s *High School* (1969) to ground some practical and ethical considerations entailed in observational shooting. In the first half of the Thursday session of week three, we hosted filmmaker David Rowe to speak about his experience in recording subjects in transit in *To Live and Ride in L.A.* (2011),

a documentary/skate video about LA fixed-gear culture. At the conclusion of this session, I issued release forms and explained to students how to use the Beatchek, the camera-mounted shotgun microphone, and the wireless lavalier microphone system in tandem. I instructed students not to use music or narration so as to focus their learning on questions about how to represent the sense of an individual's ongoing everyday life activities, in this case the movement from home to work and the start of the working day. Over the next week, students recorded these scenes. I led a second editing workshop on the Thursday of week four, introducing students to the tools of inserting, overwriting, cutting, trimming, and moving clips and adjusting sound levels to construct a story. They had the opportunity to practice on a "bank robbery" scene¹⁵ as I circulated in the class and answered individual questions. They edited their observational scenes over the weekend, which we screened and discussed as finished works on the Tuesday of week five, and students were asked to set a time to interview their subject.

I led an interviewing workshop on the Thursday of week five, in which we talked about conceptualizing questions and rapport with interviewees as well as considering location, framing, use of natural light (we did not have light kits), environmental sounds, mic placement, and moments to pause an ongoing interview. Students had to plan, conduct, and transcribe the interview, create selects, and enfold statements into their observational portrait as they deemed appropriate. In week six, as students finished shooting and editing these projects outside of class, we focused in-class activities on a practical and critical consideration of social media marketing in documentary and advocacy video. Students learned how to upload their videos to YouTube and use tagging, description, and titling functions to categorize their work. We hosted Emily Best, the CEO of the online distribution company Seed and Spark, to discuss strategies for organizing social media outreach centered on the issues raised in student films and then

looked critically at some aspects in the drive to maximize visibility. After reading and discussing Frantz Fanon's essay "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" from *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon and Philcox), the class had a particularly poignant conversation about the problem of white privilege in the highly visible social media campaign surrounding *Kony 2012* (2012, dir. Jason Russell), which framed child soldiering in Uganda and surrounding regions through the story of a white, male Californian and his six-year-old son.

We screened and discussed the commuter portraits in week seven, which led to discussion about how to conceptualize final group projects. In one session, I allowed a graduate student who had done a lot of community organizing work to lead the class in identifying themes, tacking up titled butcher paper around the space, expressing thoughts on sticky notes, and tabulating general directions. This helped some of the more soft-spoken students express their ideas but did not allow us to come to a consensus on projects and groups. I intervened to suggest some winnowing down of ideas at the end of this class session. After a final technical workshop on the Thursday session of week seven, on sound editing and basic titling, the class managed to settle on four different group projects, which I describe briefly in subsequent paragraphs. Class time across weeks eight to ten was dedicated entirely to screening and discussing cuts of student projects, to students meeting individually or in small groups with me to complete fine cutting, and to allowing groups to organize together to move their projects forward. We screened the finished student work at a public event on the Thursday of week ten.

The transition from pairs working on portraits to larger groups working on issue-focused videos took time and effort. Although most students worked well together and expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to make new friends from different majors and backgrounds, several retreated within their group and allowed stronger voices to dictate the direction of projects. I had asked students to organize

the division of labor horizontally rather than vertically to minimize unequal power relations across group members. In practice, this lack of direction about who should do what led two groups to form a de facto hierarchy of roles that closely approximated director, editor, producer, researchers, and cinematographer, with the most experienced students taking on editorial responsibilities. The other two groups simply assigned the work of finishing different sections of the film to different group members. These horizontally organized groups shot additional footage and edited several four- to five-minute sections from existing commuter portraits, which they combined in the fine cutting stage. The group that followed this direction most closely (*Stop Requested: Perceptions of Bus Commuters in LA*) created the longest and loosest video, perhaps the result of embracing compromise on opinions about how to pursue the central idea. In reflection papers on the course, students from this group also commented most favorably on the group dynamic, as with the student who remarked as follows:

As a visual editor I met with my group at least once a week to offer editing suggestions and propose stylistic ideas for the final presentation. My group was amazing. Everyone meshed well, was open to editing ideas I offered, had loads of laughter at mistakes instead of getting all grumpy, and was open to compromise. I really liked my group. I am pleased that [we did] a group project for the final, because [otherwise] I would not have gotten as acquainted with my group members as I did in the last two weeks of class. As a result of such a great group dynamic, we have decided to hang out outside of class. . . . To be honest, I think our final project was the best, hands down. Maybe I'm biased, but we did a pretty darn good job.

We also had a designated marketing and publicity committee, composed of one member from each film group, which worked on creating a flyer, writing a press release, and publicizing the screening event across the campus and in the community: an hour-long program of shorts

followed by discussion. One group made a film, *Biking in Numbers*, about issues of gender and bicycle safety through the story of a nonprofit that designs routes and organizes regular group bicycle-commuting trips, LA Bike Trains. *Stop Requested: Perceptions of Bus Commuters in LA* focused on UCLA affiliates who commuted to campus by bus, featuring a white male student from the wealthy Orange County community of Newport Beach reluctantly forced to bus one and a half hours from his Westchester apartment, an African American student busing two hours daily from his family's home in the San Gabriel Valley, and a white female professor of environmental science and land use policy who chose to bike and bus an hour to campus as an expression of her politics. The student filmmakers were able to screen the three portraits for their subjects and then bring the subjects together for a videotaped discussion over lunch about their divergent perceptions of bus commuting.

A third project, *Access Game*, centered on questions of equitable access to university resources through a story about the challenges faced by students with disabilities in commuting to and from UCLA. This video centered on the experiences of one student in the class who walked with a crutch and used access services to commute to campus. In the spirit of media phenomenology, he experimented with wearing a GoPro on a chest harness to express in long takes his experience of walking through space and opening doors. The fourth group made a short trailer video about the course and their classmates' projects, as well as an interactive map displaying the routes, transportation modes, and video portraits of the thirteen commuters profiled by students in the class in project two. Although most videos focused on the commutes of students rather than faculty or staff, they represented those who walked, drove, biked, bused, and rode in a van pool. One student, a white man in his sixties who had returned to finish a degree he had started in the 1970s, instead followed an African American cafeteria worker whose daily round-trip bus commute between the West Los Angeles

VA Hospital and his home in the Antelope Valley covered 176 miles and six hours. Last, we invited several scholars working in environmental journalism and social-impact documentary filmmaking to attend the screening as discussants.

Because the videos focused on questions of sustainability and transit access at UCLA, the end-of-quarter screening attracted scholars and administrators who work in these areas and who often express frustration at not being able to communicate the urgency of their research findings to students or the general public. This was not the same audience that attends end-of-the-year screenings at film schools. The presence of subject experts made for a lively discussion, given that they knew the stakes of issues at the center of student films better than the students themselves. And they were intrigued to see student work about transit and sustainability that prioritized story and the nuance of everyday activity over the didactic tone too typical of advocacy video. For instance, on June 6, 2014, the day after the screening, I received a kind e-mail from the chief sustainability officer at UCLA, Nurit Katz. “I can’t believe what [the students] were able to produce in one quarter!” she wrote. “This program is powerful on so many levels” (Katz). For their part, students routinely called the conversation at the end of this event a highlight of the class.

Leaders of the UCLA Bike Coalition—some featured as subjects in *Biking in Numbers*—contributed to the screening the winning video from a contest they had sponsored about what UCLA students most enjoy about cycling. Many came to the student screening to demonstrate their support. Members of the Office of Transportation, Institute of Environment and Sustainability, and Healthy Campus Initiative provided a blend of gently critical and inquisitive feedback on student work. Stakeholders in bus transit, for example, asked about the fact that *Stop Requested: Perceptions of Bus Riders in LA* included only the stories of UCLA “choice riders,” pointing out that the title suggested a different trajectory for the video. Several students from this group, including the author of the follow-

ing excerpt, wrote about this exchange in final reflection papers for the class:

I realized off of initial comments [about *Stop Requested: Perceptions of Bus Riders in LA*] that we should have been a little more conscious of the implications the title of our video had and the description. We did say the video was on perceptions of bus riders in LA but after being challenged for not getting a representative selection of riders I think making it clear that this was a video on UCLA bus riders would have been a good idea.

In this case, “being challenged” created a moment for these students to reflect on the politics of representativeness in documentary film and the power of written text to frame a video project that focused on subjects’ experiences rather than expert opinions. The students from this group acknowledged the validity of the criticism and then rearticulated their choice of subjects in different terms. They maintained that their three characters still offered meaningful representations of prevalent ways of thinking about bus transit. One student from this group explained that the point of the video was less about representativeness than about catalyzing meaningful dialogue across usually unspoken nodes of difference. They modeled the film’s conclusion, she said, on the dinner-table scenes in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), which they had viewed early on in the course and admired for its spirit of inquiry. Here, seeing their video through the eyes of an audience changed its affective and social meanings. Another student, who worked on *Access Game*, encapsulated the experience of screening her group’s film for an audience in similar terms:

I didn’t realize that what we had was kind of a small treasure. Though I was moved by [our subject’s] journey, seeing it again and again made me forget that people, in their day-to-day lives, are probably not exposed to such struggles. I forgot that seeing it only once, with fresh eyes, would truly be an educational experience. At some points during the project I didn’t want a screening, but after the event I recognized that would

have been a selfish proposal and stories like these contain so much more momentum for change, whether on a small or large scale, when viewed publically.

The energy generated by the screening event served as a marker for students like this one of their accomplishment, as well as an occasion for reflecting on the meaning of social responsibility and civic engagement in relation to media. This student had feared the prospect of showing a video in public but discovered through the process of seeing through “fresh eyes” that her group had created “a small treasure” that carried “momentum for change.” Screening the film with others, in other words, transformed her phenomenological experience of its possibilities for empowerment. This sentiment extended for some students outside of the requirements of this class: “This was absolutely my favorite class by far. I think that conducting research with community is by far more rewarding than Internet based research.” “I will use these skills to fight for my beliefs and make the world a little better!” “Awesome meeting such a diverse group of people, learning marketable + life-changing skills.”

These comments suggest that the aspects of pedagogy that led students off-campus were particularly enriching, especially compared to “Internet based research” (woe be it for the books). The exercise of participating in a classroom setting to intervene in difficult social issues inclines toward the “principles for excellence” articulated in LEAP reports (AAC&U, *LEAP Challenge*). Students described the ways that they hoped to use the videos they had made, and they defined new career trajectories as a result of working with media *toward* an end that they deemed to be socially significant and personally enriching, as in the three following passages:

I personally plan on showing this video to a group on campus called VIP Scholars, which is a scholarship fund that’s a part of the Academic Advancement Program at UCLA. They work with high school students from under-represented areas of LA, giving them advice

on how to have a competitive UC application, and walking them through the process of applying from beginning to end. I was a part of this program when I was in high school, and one thing that VIP Scholars didn’t cover was getting to UCLA if we did get accepted. Not everyone can afford to live in the dorms, and a lot of times this hinders students because they think that there is no feasible way to get back and forth between home and UCLA. Although the commute isn’t easy, it is possible, and it’s important for prospective students to understand that.

This class has been nothing short of inspiring and definitely one of the best courses I have taken at UCLA. Coming in with an interest in documentary filmmaking but no formal learning or in-depth research on the subject, I was left assured that visual storytelling was a worthwhile pursuit that can make an impact in the world. . . . In solidifying my passions and enabling me as a student to learn what goes into producing a documentary, this course has been a defining part of my college experience.

This class has changed my life and opened my eyes to possibilities that I did not ever imagine for myself prior to it. About four weeks into the class, I interviewed with a video production and marketing company and they offered me a summer internship. . . . It never even occurred to me that I could do an internship like this, but this class has given me invaluable tools that will help me to succeed in the future.

I want to reiterate that the statements quoted here make manifest LEAP’s four “essential learning outcomes”: broad knowledge applicable to “big questions,” practical and intellectual skills, civic engagement at the core of citizenship in a vibrant democracy, and integrative learning attuned to complex problems. This is a powerful argument to pose to high-ranking administrators and development personnel seeking programs to reinvigorate liberal education in their particular colleges and universities. Introductory student video work of this sort centers learning goals within the classroom, infuses the class with stakes in the social

world, and increases the likelihood that what students make might be taken up, considered, or used by community partners.

These student films have not yet had broad circulation or contributed substantially to an ongoing social issue campaign; fitting this goal for pedagogy into the initial ten-week course was tricky on several counts. First, students expressed frustration about not quite knowing what to tell community partners. Developing these relationships takes time, and so students had to begin contacting groups before they knew what their final projects would be. Understandably, some of the groups that students approached regarded this vagueness with confusion, if not suspicion. It was not clear how student projects that were focused generally on commuting would or would not contribute to their mission. Second, nonprofit groups and students were not always aligned on questions of messaging and story. Course pedagogy encouraged students to record and edit in such a way as to embrace contingency, surprise, and the organic stories that arose from recording actual people in their everyday lives. Nonprofits and organizations that are focused on particular issues, however, were reluctant to endorse communications that veered off-message.

One pair of students, for instance, videotaped a bike rider who commuted to UCLA from about ten miles away. During their recording of his commute, he rode along the sidewalk of a busy street for several blocks, a decision that cuts against best practices for bicycle safety because the bike rider enters intersections on the driver's blind side. On this particular day, a car at one such intersection hit the rider, though no one was hurt. My students recorded this moment and its aftermath, and the scene became the starting point for their thinking about issues of bicycle safety in a car-centric city. Subsequently, this project sparked a larger group of students to make the *Biking in Numbers* project mentioned previously. The nonprofit at its center, LA Bike Trains, seeks to address the route confusion and feelings of vulnerability of bicycle commuters through the creation of daily group rides along bike-friendly, low-traffic

roads in the city. The term "bike trains" is meant to frame these regular rides as a form of transit infrastructure, like a train system, that increases safety and accessibility for all riders. However, the fact that the students chose to represent the particular accident they recorded in a way that was somewhat sympathetic to the rider left LA Bike Trains wary of embedding the film on its website, which the nonprofit reasoned would amount to a tacit endorsement of its contents.

Other parts of the student film, they added, veered from the branding of their organization in ways that could undermine what the organization hoped to accomplish. They wanted to promote bike trains as an intervention into the ways that Los Angelinos thought about commuting infrastructure; they viewed creating a bike train as a process akin to building a highway or a subway line. For this reason, LA Bike Trains was not interested in promoting the idea that individuals should go out cycling on their own and would have preferred a film that profiled the different routes and route leaders they had developed throughout LA, an impossible task for my students in the short time frame they had. This kind of dynamic creates a storytelling problem and a question for learning. How should students craft their work so as to balance and respect expert opinions and the lived experiences of everyday people, which may not accord with organizational communications imperatives? What kind of recording—the observation of everyday life or the interview with an expert—leads students to do more critical thinking about the issues their projects raise?

Questions aside, the dialogue with groups such as LA Bike Trains about student projects proved to be immensely instructive for subsequent iterations of these courses. I taught the Mobility in LA course a second time in the fall of 2014, this time establishing relationships with six potential community partners and writing one-paragraph descriptions of potential films before the start of the course. I invited enrolled students to add their own ideas in the first week as well. Readings and film viewings

framed the theme of mobility more broadly in this iteration by including material on the movement of food, structural inhibitions to mobility in the city, and community art initiatives that focused on movement and place. In the first week of class, students voted on which partners to follow, and I invited leaders of these organizations to visit the class over the first month to present on their missions and meet the students. Students chose to make documentary/advocacy videos in collaboration with the Pasadena Parent Action Group, part of the LA County-wide Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Initiative; the LA-based open streets organization CicLAvia; a community arts nonprofit called the Mobile Mural Lab; a network of LA community gardens; and a food truck vendor known as Panther's Catering.

Although the basic production assignments (videos on space, an individual project, and a group project on a social issue) remained the same, orienting them to build relationships with community groups external to UCLA presented new kinds of opportunities and difficulties. Timing, cultural differences between students and partners, the need to record events far from campus, and the complexity of the social issues were significant obstacles to the completion of successful student projects in ten weeks, but students also learned a great deal about the organizations they followed and how key stakeholders thought about the importance of their work. Although we did not have time to organize community screenings, we did have a public screening at UCLA in which the work received positive feedback, and all partners received copies of final student films to use as they saw fit. A number of these students have continued using video to work on food-related equity issues since completing the course and held screening events in 2015–16.

In my first 2015 course, titled *Diasporic Non-fiction: Media Engagements with Memory and Displacement* and cross-listed in Chicana/o studies and African American studies, I spaced the three assignments out across two quarters, added in a voice-over writing element to the portrait of a space, and tasked students with

shooting staged scenes to evoke the past in the present rather than observational scenes *per se*. The work shown at the end of the first quarter was very well received. Over the second quarter, this group of students had time to organize community screenings, develop a distribution strategy, and participate in policy actions. Several screenings drew audiences of sixty to seventy community members. Student projects in this class focused on questions of diversity and campus climate at UCLA, union activism in the black worker crisis in LA, gentrification and the displacement of Latina/o residents in the neighborhood of Echo Park, queer Latina identity, LA-based guerrillas displaced from the civil war in El Salvador, and perceptions of the “bad immigrant” in relation to discourses of the undocumented in the United States, to name a few. The Division of Undergraduate Education intends to build on our lessons learned in 2015–16 by exploring ways to integrate media production assignments into the Freshman Cluster Program at UCLA, starting with a yearlong course titled “Food: A Lens on Environment and Sustainability.” I am part of a team of four professors teaching this cluster, which begins with two quarters of courses in the lecture and weekly discussion style on a theme and then concludes with one quarter in which students take smaller seminars and work on inquiry-based projects that build on what they have learned. We are working out an assignment in which all 167 students in the course will contribute one- to two-minute experimental videos made on smartphones to a website about the sustainability of food items in the grocery store.

Conclusion

Pedagogy grounded in media practice can and should have a prominent place in twenty-first-century liberal education, though perhaps this is not a point that needs proving to filmmakers, scriptwriters, and media studies scholars. Rather, I have tried to make the case here that these traditions of teaching and learning intersect in suggestive ways with national policy

directives about what liberal education should be and do. Students collaborate on complex problems, learn practical skills, grapple with the ethics of representation, and contribute to social movements. I have argued that nonfiction practice rooted in critical media pedagogy, attunement to everyday life experience, and “learning by doing” facilitates these goals and have presented evidence from the ASPIRE pilot at UCLA to underscore the significance of administrative work, studio-style screening and discussion, and socially significant “big questions” in bringing such concepts to fruition. Student comments in evaluations and reflection papers suggest that this kind of pedagogy leads to deep, high-impact learning engagements set as key goals in LEAP reports. And this kind of curriculum is basic literacy, not the domain of professional film schools. The film school at UCLA, for instance, can admit only sixty undergraduates of the hundreds who apply to their program every year. It is appropriate in this context for undergraduate education and disciplines in the liberal arts to offer innovative courses in media production.

Still, it is up to leaders in media practice to articulate arguments for their broader inclusion in liberal education, given that relatively few scholars in other disciplines have the production experience from which to draw. Media practitioner-scholars must continue to write about how audiovisual work can contribute significant, critical, timely scholarship within many humanities and social science disciplines. For the moment, this must be part of a strategy for developing curricular and activist pathways in media practice for the liberal arts, though these grounds may be shifting. In addition to the work of the University Film Video Association, the recently developed *Sensate* journal for “experiments in critical media practice,” new media directions in the Cultural Studies Association journal *Lateral*, and the development of the Scalar platform for multimedia and interactive publishing suggest promising means through which scholarly audiovisual work can move through a process of peer review alternative to film festival screenings.

Finally, I want to reiterate the need for media practice courses in the context of liberal education to engage significant social questions *and* noncommercial forms of production. Within the framework of liberal education, there is a danger to framing the value of media practice courses primarily in terms of imbuing students with professional production techniques. This is part of the reason I have emphasized critical media literacy here. I am wary of dogmatic statements about what makes for a “good” shot, about a sequence that “works,” or about skills that a filmmaker “needs.” Too often they are tacitly grounded in a profit motive. The form a media work takes, at least within the model of nonfiction pedagogy I have articulated, follows from the makers’ humble, nuanced, material encounters with the world rather than an a priori set of ideas about the good and the true. These encounters mirror in student learning a process for democratic participation. Students come to a class in media practice carrying a set of subjective experiences and habits of looking in tow. They learn about the subjects of their films in the present of recording and then differently in the relatively removed process of editing footage. They negotiate their presuppositions against video fragments that are suffused with the contingent, stubborn particulars of a subject’s everyday life activities, often hard to stereotype. They learn about the consequences of their choices via the perspectives of diverse other viewers in screening events. And best of all, in my view, some come to develop new interests in social issues and learn ways of being leaders in these fields as a result of their media-making activities.

One film and media studies minor who took my course, for instance, applied because she liked movies, but she e-mailed me several months after the end of the quarter with news of an exciting job prospect. She wrote that she was trying to pursue a career in specialized transportation services and had taken the initiative to organize a screening of work from our class for representatives of the Orange County public school system who wanted to develop access services for their students with dis-

abilities. She is learning on the fly about how to match her skills with a job, but emotionally and ethically, she knows *why* she wants to pursue this line of work. Although I too love the movies and watch many, this anecdote for me communicates the real point of media practice for liberal education. Now is the time to make more points.

NOTES

1. The College of Letters and Science, home of the liberal arts at UCLA, includes humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, life sciences, and undergraduate education divisions.

2. I was trained in observational and participatory forms of documentary filmmaking in the visual and environmental studies major at Harvard, first as a student and then across four years as a teaching assistant for introductory and intermediate video production courses. The film/video production track emphasized social analysis and critical thinking through small-crew media-making about everyday life practices. Reflecting on the experience of using media production to teach within the liberal arts led directly to my dissertation research, which considered the evidentiary status of digitally produced documentary films. When I received the e-mail, I was also several years into coproducing, shooting, and editing a documentary directed by Zeinabu irene Davis, *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Cinema from UCLA*, about the L.A. Rebellion film movement that emerged from the EthnoCommunications Program at UCLA (1970–72). Reinvented in the mid-1990s by Robert Nakamura as a community media curriculum within the Asian American Studies Center, the current version of the EthnoCommunications Program is directed by social documentarian Renee Tajima-Peña, whom I consider a leader in this field.

3. The Division of Undergraduate Education provides leadership within the framework of shared governance to cultivate high-quality learning opportunities for diverse undergraduates, including foundational coursework, advanced research projects, counseling services, minors, capstones, service learning internships, and pilot programs such as ASPIRE, which is administered through a unit called Undergraduate Education Initiatives.

4. Issues at the center of this article were also touched upon in recent work published in the *Journal of Film and Video*, including Mateer 3–14; Holden 23–37; Tripp 5–16; and Allen 9–22.

5. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is the largest group of scholars in the country dedicated to theorizing, publicizing, and implementing policies on undergraduate liberal

education attuned to equity and social responsibility in a global context. The AAC&U, presided over by Carol Geary Schneider, sponsors research such as LEAP, publishes reports, organizes conferences, and conducts advocacy campaigns for civically engaged liberal education.

6. Across ten years of research (2005–15), LEAP settled on four “essential learning outcomes,” reprinted in the AAC&U’s *LEAP Challenge* report and summarized here: (1) broad knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural worlds that takes “big questions” as guides to subject matter; (2) intellectual and practical skills such as critical thinking, written and oral communication, collaborative learning, and quantitative literacy; (3) personal and social responsibility, including civic engagement, ethics, intercultural competence, and self-efficacy for lifelong learning; and (4) integrative learning in which students apply knowledge sets and skills to complex problems.

7. All of these activities featured prominently in the Laboratory School developed by pragmatist John Dewey as part of his research in philosophy at the University of Chicago. The school’s curriculum built upon the idea, in historian Louis Menand’s terms, that “knowledge is a by-product of activity: people do things in the world, and the doing results in learning something that, if deemed useful, gets carried along into the next activity” (322). I interpret Menand’s characterization through Collins’s lens as an apt rationale also for teaching critical media production in universities today, where media-making activity can center on civics and public interest so as to question the profit motive that is tacit in “high” production values and the “good” story. I expand on the political implications of a critical framework for video production pedagogy in the conclusion of this article.

8. UCLA Grand Challenges aims to provide resources for researchers to collaborate across disciplines on tackling the nation’s most intractable social and ecological problems. The initiative, in its broadest sense, “connects faculty, students and supporters from all disciplines, working together to solve critical issues.” Current issues are “Sustainable LA” and “Depression,” with several more to be announced in coming years (“About UCLA Grand Challenges”).

9. Although the relationship between cycling and gentrification remains a point of controversy (plenty of low-income Los Angelinos ride bikes and want more bike lanes), numerous individuals and groups have pointed out inequitable spending on transit modes that tend to be used more by upper- and middle-class whites. Haskell Wexler and Johanna Demetrakas’s documentary *Bus Riders Union* (2000) and Sahra Sulaiman’s 2014–15 reporting for *StreetsBlogLA* offer poignant and nuanced critiques of this bias. The wild economic forces unleashed by public infrastructure projects such as new metro lines, bike lanes, and park renovations,

moreover, often have devastating effects on low-income, urban communities of color who rent housing. Gentrification processes that raise rents—and seem to go along with absentee landlords, property acquisition firms, real estate agents, developers, and local government functionaries suddenly using a variety of nasty tactics to evict low-income black and brown tenants—have displaced thousands of longtime residents from LA neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights, Echo Park, and Koreatown to distant exurbs with shoddy infrastructure. This is the deeply troubling shadow cast by many “mixed-use” and “green” development projects that aim to attract (white) professionals to bolster local tax revenues. See, for instance, Natalia Molina’s 2015 history of Latina/o “place-makers” in Echo Park as a starting point for critiquing aspects of gentrification as an ongoing neocolonial project (Molina 69–111).

10. Currently, not all majors and minors require capstones, but the numbers that do are increasing. Certification criteria for capstone experiences at UCLA, it is worth mentioning, echo key points from the LEAP report on twenty-first-century higher education. The mission statement for the UCLA Capstone Initiative states that certified projects must “engage in a creative, inquiry-based learning experience”; “culminate in a tangible product that can be archived (including film, video, etc.)”; count toward the student’s major as an upper-division class; and be sharable in a public exhibition, performance, presentation, or publication format. Capstones are meant to allow students to apply the theories and ideas they have learned through coursework to a hands-on, signature project in their senior years (“Criteria and Options”).

11. Situated within the Division of Undergraduate Education, the AAP runs summer bridge programs for first-year and transfer students, scholarship programs, mentoring and academic advising services, and collaborative learning workshops for students struggling to adapt to university culture.

12. We screened *High School* (1969, dir. Frederick Wiseman) and *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961, dir. Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin) in their entirety in the first two weeks. Later we looked at excerpts from *Sweetgrass* (2009, dir. Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash), *The Gleaners and I* (2000, dir. Agnès Varda), *To Live and Ride in LA* (2011, dir. David Rowe), and *The Long Wait* (2013, dir. Jason da Silva), among others, to think about how to represent subjects moving through space.

13. Student work from several of the ASPIRE classes may be seen at www.aspirelab.org, organized thematically under the “@UCLA” menu. See work from the class described here by following the “Commuting” link.

14. We hosted guest filmmakers for two hours on three class days—two of which took place in these weeks—in events open to the general public. GERALYN DREYFOUS, the cofounder of Impact Partners; Sarah

Johnson, a partner at Worldview Entertainment; and Amy Ziering, the producer of *The Invisible War* (2012, dir. Kirby Dick), all had previous work relationships with Samuelson and volunteered to come to UCLA on behalf of ASPIRE for public screening and discussion events that coincided with course meeting times.

15. For reasons I do not know but would be curious to learn, this sequence of film shots, likely recorded in the 1970s and depicting the early phase of a bank robbery, seems to have appeared in many production syllabi in exercises to introduce students to continuity and parallel editing techniques. A former professor passed the shots on to me.

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