

Documentary filmmaking in youth projects

– An inspiration to getting started –



KULTUROPA



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INDEX

- Introduction 3

- Getting started with documentary filmmaking in youth projects
 - * Why documentary film? 4
 - * The power of filmmaking 5
 - * The Social Documentary 7
 - * 1,2,3 - How to... 9

- Real people
 - * Preparing the participants in front of and behind the camera 13
 - * Interview simulation game 14
 - * The HKB experience 15

- About the writers of this booklet 17

INTRODUCTION

"Documentary filmmaking in youth projects" is a small guide to getting started with using documentary filmmaking in your youth project.

The booklet is made by the participants of the "Heart, keep beating" project; a Youth in Action supported youth project, working with documentary film in order to give voice to a specific group of youth-at-risk; namely young people living with HIV.

The objective of this booklet is to inspire other young people and youth workers to use documentary filmmaking as a tool in their work. What is the power of filmmaking and how can it be used to address such issues as discrimination and social exclusion? How do we work with youth-at-risk groups in our film projects, and how does the filmmaking affect the people in front of and behind the camera? These are some of the topics that "Documentary filmmaking in youth projects" touches upon.

If you want to know more about the "Heart, keep beating" project after reading this booklet, please consult the project webpage: <http://www.heartkeepbeating.eu> or the Kulturopa webpage: <http://www.kulturopa.dk>

GETTING STARTED WITH DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN YOUTH PROJECTS

WHY DOCUMENTARY FILM?

There are no specific recipes for working with documentary filmmaking in youth projects, and this booklet does not intend to offer any!

In our project, “Heart, keep beating”, we chose to use film as a medium, because of our own personal backgrounds in filmmaking, and because we felt that we had found a theme that was suited for a documentary film.

You may choose to work with documentary filmmaking in your youth project, because it can be used as a teambuilding activity between the participants; because you want to address a specific social issue that would do great on film; because it would allow the young participants to express themselves in a new way, or for any other number of reasons you could possibly think of.

Either way documentary filmmaking is a way to work with the reality that surrounds us – it’s a way to reflect upon this reality and share our thoughts and experiences with others.

And that’s exactly what we hope this booklet will inspire you to do!

SUGGESTIONS

Before getting started with your documentary film youth project, try answering the following questions:

1. Why do I/we want to work with documentary films in our youth project?
2. Who is the target group of the project and how can they benefit from working with documentary film?
3. Who is the target group of the final film?

Answering these questions will help you getting started, also if you have not yet defined the topic and theme of your film.

THE POWER OF FILMMAKING

Preparing our youth projects, we have to take our target group into consideration, and how to best reach this group. Film is a powerful medium with the potential of reaching a wide group of people, and this in itself is a reason to consider working with films in youth projects, and might be the reason you got interested in working with documentary films in the first place?

However, potential visibility and dissemination possibilities are far from the most important things to consider when choosing to work with filmmaking in our youth projects...

First and foremost, we have to think about the people directly involved in the project; the young people and youth workers who are to make the documentary film, be it in front of or behind the camera. Because, film is indeed a powerful medium, and when it works, it also affects the people directly involved in making it.

In the “Heart, keep beating” project, working with this specific documentary film was an eye-opener into a social reality that was completely new to most of us. For the people behind the camera, this experience meant a new view upon the issue of HIV, and for the young participants in front of the camera, the film was an opportunity to be listened to and to get to share their stories and experiences.

But the project also opened up for new and unexpected situations and discussions; What is the true nature of discrimination and can films help combating it? What if the film just makes things worse? Read more about this in the section “Real People”.

SUGGESTIONS

When working with documentary filmmaking in youth projects, it might be a good idea to look for ways to address the questions of “the power of filmmaking” at an early stage; to talk with the participants about their expectations, doubts and fears connected to the project, before getting started. It’s important that both the people in front of and behind the camera are aware of what they are getting into.

You could ask the participants:

1. What do you expect from participating in this project?
2. Have you considered the long term impact this project might have on your everyday life? (to the participants in front of the camera, this might be particularly relevant)

Discuss these topics in plenum or have the participants working with them in pairs with a subsequent presentation for the group.

THE SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

Documentary film is, by nature, a social medium because it focuses on the world that surrounds us. Many documentaries address such themes as discrimination, exclusion and other social issues.

Working with documentary films in youth projects you have the possibility to explore such social issues in a new context. It will allow the participants to engage in discussions about how to improve their everyday lives, and by working on something as concrete as a film, they will have to step up to actually do something to make the changes happen.

Working with a documentary film project is an ideal opportunity to engage groups of youth-at-risk. The process of filmmaking will allow the participants to explore new ways of expression, and especially for at-risk youth groups this experience can be very valuable and offer new perspectives upon their own situations.



SUGGESTIONS

If you want your documentary project to address a specific social issue, discuss this with the participants.

You could ask them:

1. If you could change one thing in your everyday life, what would it be?

The answers to this question might help you define the theme and topic of your documentary.

The next steps are for the participants to identify:

2. What they would do to actually improve this specific situation

And:

3. How this challenge can be addressed in a documentary film.

1-2-3, HOW-TO...

After all, we couldn't help ourselves; we just had to provide you with a small how-to section! However, this section is not to be followed too rigidly. Please work with your documentary film project in any way that suits the project better as these are just a few examples and suggestions!



SCENARIO 1 – FILM AS TEAMBUILDING

Working with documentary film in your youth project can be a team-building activity for a group of young people and/or youth workers. In this scenario, the participants get to work with filmmaking in small teams following a general theme and during a very limited amount of time (1-2 days).

The idea is that every team makes a small documentary film of max 5 minutes that is then subsequently presented for the group.

This approach will teach the participants to work together to achieve a common goal, and working with very clear deadlines.

Film as teambuilding is suitable for all age groups, and should be conducted by one or more “experts”/ youth workers. The advantage of working with filmmaking in this way is that you can keep production to a minimum. It’s fast and fun and you shouldn’t worry too much about technical stuff.

1. Find your theme (a good theme for film as teambuilding would be something very general that the participants can then go deeper into and make more concrete. E.g. “exclusion”, “community” or “violence”)

2. Divide the group into sub-groups of 4-5 participants. You might want to define specific roles for each member of the group (e.g. “director”, “camera-operator” etc.)

It’s a good idea to start the process with a small workshop with examples of documentary films, artistic effects and approaches, plus an introduction to using the camera.

Each group should have access to their own camera. Set deadline and time limits, and send the groups off to record their films (e.g. each group has 3 hours to record max 30 min. of videotape.)

3. When the videos have been recorded, it is time to edit. This is done on computer, and you can choose either to teach the participants how to use an editing programme, or have an “expert” editing the videos for the participants.

When the videos are all done, each group can present their film.

You need:

- 1 video camera + 1 videotape (or memory card) per group
- Access to editing equipment
- Some technical assistance if you’re not used to working with video and editing equipment

SCENARIO 2 – YOUTH WORKERS AS GUIDES

In this approach, the youth leaders will work as guides for a group of young people wanting to create a documentary film during a longer period of time (1 week – 1 year).

The group should be no bigger than 5 participants, and the roles of each member should be very well defined from the beginning (e.g. “director”, “camera-operator”, “sound-engineer”, “editor”, “assistant”, “film participant” etc.)

This approach is suitable for young participants from 15 years and above. Like “Film as teambuilding” it will teach the participants to work together, and it can be used to address important issues in their lives and communities.

Because of the expanded project period this approach will allow more time to go deeper into specific areas of interest, and likewise allow more focus on the participants’ personal development.

1. Find the topic and theme of the film (e.g. let the young participants define the topic of the film, on the basis of a pre-set theme). Be prepared to spend a lot of time getting this right! Have the young participants research their topic and the place of their recordings. Spend time watching other documentaries for inspiration and discussion; make workshops on how to use the video equipment and how to put together an interesting documentary film (artistic and visual effects, narrative patterns etc.)

Prepare the participants well (see the points “The power of film-making” + “Real people”).

You might want to have the participants making a “shooting script”; what needs to be filmed; when and why? How will these recordings go into the final film?

2. The participants record the film. Make sure that everybody knows what is going on and why, at every step of the way. Make regular briefings with the participants and make sure that everybody is comfortable with their tasks.

Be prepared to stop and spend time dealing with the strong emotions that might come up related to the process or the topic.

3. The participants/ an "expert" edit the film. Allow more time to this than what you think will be necessary. MUCH more time! Especially in documentary filmmaking, in which we do not always work with predefined scripts, this part of the process is very time-demanding, because this is when the film is actually put together and the decisions about the final structure of the film will be made.

You need:

- 1 video camera + an indefinite number of tapes (or memory card)
- Access to sound recording equipment
- Access to editing equipment
- Some technical assistance at hand, even if you are already used to working with video and editing equipment; something always goes wrong
- A lot of time and patience...

SCENARIO 3 – YOUNG PEOPLE ON THEIR OWN

In this approach, a group of young people come together to create a documentary film at their own initiative.

It requires a great deal of autonomy from the group, and a big amount of dedication to the project too.

This is the approach we used for the "Heart, keep beating" project, and it pretty much follows the pattern of the "Youth workers as guides" approach, except for the fact that the project is entirely developed and monitored by the participants themselves.

This approach is useful in such projects that wish to include a diverse group of participants, because it allows both youth workers and young people to work closer together in creating their own project from the beginning.

You need:

- 1 video camera + an indefinite number of tapes (or memory card)
- Access to sound recording equipment
- Access to editing equipment
- Some technical assistance at hand, even if you are already used to working with video and editing equipment; something always goes wrong
- A lot of time and patience...

REAL PEOPLE

PREPARING THE PARTICIPANTS IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND THE CAMERA

Being in front of a camera for the first time can be a very strange experience. Kind of like hearing your own voice on tape. It doesn't really sound like you, does it?

It is a very good idea preparing the on-screen participants for this experience.

Furthermore it is important to prepare the participants for the affects and outcomes their participation might have on their future lives, as mentioned in the beginning of this booklet.

For the off-screen participants there is a lot of preparation to be done too; working with the documentary film might imply them to confront new realities that they are not familiar with, and this can be a very strong experience too.

SUGGESTIONS

Prepare the on- and off-screen participants for the mental impact the film process might have on their lives. Will they see or experience new things that might be shocking or life-changing for them?

INTERVIEW SIMULATION GAME

In the “Heart, keep beating” project, we used a very classical documentary approach with interviews being the basis of the film material.

In order to prepare the participants to make the interviews, we made up a small “interview simulation”; a game-like activity that can be easily adapted to other youth film projects.

THE INTERVIEW SIMULATION GAME

The intentions of the interview simulations are

- 1) To practise the questions that we are going to ask the participants of the film.
- 2) To test the quality of the questions and invent new questions.
- 3) To practise making interviews.
- 4) To get to know each other better!

How the interview simulations are done

The group members will interview each other, asking each other the same questions that are prepared for the participants of the film. The questions are divided into four categories: 1) Basic information, 2) Personal trivia, 3) Personal values, 4) Life experiences.

During the interview the “reporter” should try to transform the interview into a conversation rather than an interrogation. The most important thing is LISTENING! Listen to what the other person tells you, and ask the next question in the context of what you have just heard. Feel free to invent new questions if it feels natural!

This exercise aims at practicing our skills as interviewers, and also helps us find out whether the questions we have prepared for the participants are interesting and relevant enough. At the same time it is a good way for the group members to get to know each other better!

THE HKB EXPERIENCE

After finishing the “Heart, keep beating” project, we decided to make a follow-up activity; a study visit that we called HKB IN CPH. During this study visit, we invited all the participants from the initial youth project (young people from Denmark, Romania and Portugal) to Copenhagen, and also included a group of Finnish youth workers interested in working with film projects.

During this study visit, we discussed the process of the project, and some new topics came up; most importantly we discussed the actual importance and impact of the film project, touching upon ethical considerations that had been present during the entire process, but never discussed in open forum before.

This discussion gave us all a lot to think about, and made us realize that perhaps the most important thing to remember when working with documentary films in youth projects is that documentary films deal with Real People; People that have normal lives, feelings, problems and joys, and whose lives will somehow be affected by the film project.



One of the young participants of the film expressed his fear that even if our goal was to combat discrimination and social exclusion, the final result might actually be the complete opposite; that the participants might risk facing additional discrimination because of their participation in the documentary film (i.e. some members of their local communities were not aware of their HIV status and might act differently if they were to see the film).

This is a very serious matter that should ideally have been confronted at a much earlier stage.

Another participant argued that the film aimed at showing things the way they were, and if that would result in some change of attitude by individual members of the local community, this would be down-weighted by the greater effect of the positive message of the documentary film on a broader audience.

If we were to repeat our experience of making the “Heart, keep beating” project, we would pay much greater attention to these ethical questions from the beginning of the process.

It is extremely important that the participants agree with the idea and message that you are trying to transmit through the film; but it is equally important that the participants feel safe and protected through the entire process, and even after it is over.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Be aware that you are dealing with Real People, and listen to their needs and fears, before starting your project.
2. Be prepared to change your project completely, at any time, if it turns out that the needs of the participants are different from what you had expected.
3. Be aware that you will be confronted with ethical decisions at all times of the filmmaking process and be ready to discuss these with the group in order to take the best decision.

ABOUT THE WRITERS OF THIS BOOKLET

Read more about the writers of this booklet, and the people behind the "Heart, keep beating" project on the project webpage <http://www.heartkeepbeating.eu> and on the Kulturopa webpage <http://www.kulturopa.dk>

Editor

Mia Degner

Layout

Eduardo Abrantes

Photos

Front page: Sara Janic

Page 7 & 15: Sirid Ane Laursen

Page 9: Ruxandra Maria Comisel