



Learning the City Through Stories: Audio Documentary as Urban Communication Pedagogy

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In this article, we critically examine audio documentary at the intersections of urban storytelling, community-based learning, and urban communication pedagogy. We argue that audio documentary is both a research method and mode of storytelling production that can help students and listeners creatively learn about urban life. First, we focus on the intersections of urban communication and documentary in an effort to frame how documentary offers unique opportunities to learn about urban life and culture. Second, we argue that audio documentary production courses offer students experiential and community-based opportunities to learn about and do urban communication.

Keywords: urban communication, audio documentary, experiential learning, pedagogy, community-based learning

Introduction: Hearing the City

It's 3:00 a.m. on Sunday, and we just left a computer lab where we had been advising our students about their audio documentary projects and putting the final touches on our own documentary. For weeks, in an effort to prepare for an intensive 36-hour audio documentary project, we have sent our students out into their respective neighborhoods to record the sounds of the city, encouraging them to listen for the mundane and the extraordinary. As we travel north on the Red Line under the Loop, the two of us have an opportunity to consider the acoustic environment of this Chicago Transit Authority line. We hear a young couple talking quietly about where to sit and a woman toward the back of the train speaking

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¹ This is one of many projects that we have coauthored or coproduced. We rotate first author because all of our research and productions are cocreated and developed through equal participation and contributions. We thank Giorgia Aiello, Simone Tosoni, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

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Spanish into a cell phone. And we fill the space with talk about the stories our students are creating together. After the North and Clybourn stop, the Red Line ascends from the tunnel to elevated tracks, which is the norm for Chicago's rapid transit system (and the inspiration for the nickname "the L" or "El"). The sound in the car changes as the swirling air from the tunnel gives way to steel wheels clicking and rattling on steel tracks. Soon we have an urban symphony as the beats bleeding from the earbuds of a kid sitting a few rows behind us fill the car. He's listening to rap, and the music syncs perfectly with the sound of the train. In the contemporary urban soundscape, there is now a soundtrack to enhance or interfere with, depending on one's viewpoint, the vision of the city that appears out the windows of the train. We take a few moments to listen to the sounds as the Red Line pulls into the Fullerton station, which is where we exit.

We were working through the night with our students because they are participating in a documentary "boot camp." This assignment requires teams of students (from St. Louis University and DePaul University in Chicago) to create a three-minute audio piece telling a story about a group in Chicago or an interesting urban issue during a 36-hour window (Gould, 2013). The assignment creates a unique experiential learning opportunity for our students that extends what each of us has been doing individually in our respective courses and cities. Moreover, the documentary boot camp provides a context to consider relationships between documentary storytelling and urban communication pedagogy, which is our focus in this article.

In this article, we critically examine audio documentary at the intersections of urban storytelling, community-based learning, and urban communication pedagogy. We argue that audio documentary is both a research method and mode of storytelling production that can help students and listeners creatively learn about urban life. First, we focus on the intersections of urban communication and documentary in an effort to frame how documentary offers unique opportunities to learn about urban life and culture. Here, we pay particular attention to the broad spectrum of urban communication contexts and the diverse approaches to documentary that uniquely analyze and narrate the contemporary city. Second, we argue that audio documentary production courses offer students community-based experiential opportunities to learn about and do urban communication. Because of the sound-rich focus of this mode of research and production, we have both found audio documentary to be especially useful when encouraging students to engage with the city. The article is ultimately grounded in our individual experiences teaching in Chicago and St. Louis separately and together through the repeated documentary boot-camp assignment in which our students work together in both cities.

Documentary Storytelling as Urban Communication

Urbanization and the urban experience have been consistent topics of fiction and nonfiction storytelling throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. People's engagement with, through, and in the city is shaped by a combination of material stability and change linked to land, labor, and capital and through communication in and about the city. That is, the city is experienced as a material site that remains stable (diverse populations, loud noises, architectural innovation) and is a space of rapid

transformation (gentrification of neighborhoods, an influx of new immigrant groups, the demolition of a stadium to make way for a new one). The city is also a site of symbolic action.²

James Carey (1989) argued for a ritual model of communication, defining communication as the creation, maintenance, repair, and transformation of reality through the use of symbols. We research and teach urban communication as a more specific application of Carey's broad definition. That is, urban communication is concerned with the creation, maintenance, repair, and transformation of urban experiences through symbolic action. The city as a physical space and as a site for unique cultural encounters is discussed, debated, framed, and modeled through communication. Although this explanation of urban communication might seem somewhat general, scholars working in this area do not share a single method, there is not a specific site of analysis within the city, and there is not a particular communication context that reflects this mode of research.³ For example, urban communication contexts would include interpersonal conversations among strangers waiting for a bus, small-group efforts to organize a block party, the public performance of a flash mob, and senior citizens using Second Life to redesign a local public park.

Mass media can flatten out communication, facilitating a shift away from idiosyncratic local cultures to a more homogenous national popular culture; however, early arguments about the unique ontic qualities of the city advanced by scholars such as Louis Wirth (1938) and Georg Simmel (Wolff, 1969) continue to resonate because the city remains a unique site of experience and analysis. We are especially interested in the city as a location that can engage people's senses in ways that are often quite different from rural and suburban environments. Cities' larger populations, broader spectrum of languages spoken, presence of mass transportation, pace of movement in the streets, and general level of noise are but a few examples of ways that the metropolis is both a unique spatial and communicative environment.

Although urban communication is a growing area of study that features diverse approaches to researching the urban environment, publications have not focused on pedagogy. We fill this gap through an analysis of audio-documentary-production and digital-storytelling courses as opportunities to teach and do urban communication fieldwork. Our teaching and research in the area of urban communication has foregrounded the experiential, often focusing on the ways that the study of communication can help individuals understand and feel the city in unique ways. A sensorial engagement with the city might seem to be the terrain of other disciplines, but how people hear the city, go about their everyday lives in urban environments, reflect on the unique smells of urban locales, and consider the overwhelming dynamic visual culture of the city are linked to the ways that we create, maintain, repair, and transform reality

² We recognize that our repeated use of the phrase "the city" in this article can conflate a range of discrete urban experiences that distinguish one city from another. We return to the unique features of different cities later in this article, but for now we highlight some common features that distinguish the city from other sites where people dwell or visit.

³ Perhaps one of the best ways to understand this diversity is to consider the range of topics presented in edited publications because this format is purposefully broad. See Burd, Drucker, and Gumpert (2007); Jassem, Drucker, and Burd (2010); Matsaganis, Gallagher, and Drucker (2013); and Gibson and Lowes (2007). Also, see the recurring city series in *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*.

through the use of symbols. Each of the material experiences is framed and represented individually and collectively through symbolic action. One mode of such representation is documentary storytelling.

Documentary is multidimensional in subject matter and approach.⁴ This mode of communication helps audiences understand the urban world, to tease out myriad nuanced descriptions of urban politics, design, and everyday life. Documentaries, like other forms of cultural production that emerge from and represent research, are made based upon a series of choices and negotiations. Clifford Geertz (1973) notes that texts emerging from fieldwork are “fictions: fiction in the sense that they are ‘something made.’” This is “the original sense of the meaning of fiction—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments” (p. 15). Derrick Price (1997) identifies a similar feature of documentary photography as cultural production when he foregrounds the common (and mistaken) use of the phrase “taking photographs rather than making them, because the marks of their construction are not immediately visible; they have the appearance of having come about as a function of the world itself rather than as carefully fabricated cultural objects” (p. 95).

We call attention to this broader issue of making culture here and in our classes because a documentary is the product of a series of choices that the documentarian must consider when she or he does documentary work. Teaching students about documentary as a series of choices (i.e., documentary as representation rather than reproduction) is the first step in facilitating a deeper grasp of documentary production as urban communication storytelling.⁵ That is, students make stories about the urban world, and their decisions during the research and production process (whom to interview, when to use ambient sound, how closely to mic a participant, whether to use a cross-fade or a hard edit, etc.) shape the story that is told. The selections are influenced by the standpoint of the storyteller, his or her interactions with research participants, and important political and historic issues related to the story topic. Thus, the constructed nature of documentary extends beyond the documentarian since documentaries, as communication artifacts, are usually cocreated rather than simply being a product of a single producer’s actions.⁶ This cocreation happens during interviews and participant observation, when people are recorded doing the things that they do, and when audiences engage in the stories and retell what they hear.

Our approach to teaching audio-documentary production is grounded in a belief that documentary is not merely a mode for representing the historical world to an audience but is also an exciting way to cocreate knowledge. Audio documentary emerges from qualitative research and can be assessed as a qualitative research product (Makagon & Neumann, 2009). Both of us came to documentary through a quest for more creative and sensorially engaging ways to do and represent fieldwork rather than through production programs. We believe that documentary production can be a creative outlet

⁴ “Historians and critics have frequently drawn attention to the difficulty of defining documentary, which cannot be recognized as possessing a unique style, method or body of techniques,” writes Derrick Price (1997, p. 63).

⁵ For a discussion of documentary as representation rather than reproduction, see Nichols, 2001.

⁶ We note that documentaries are “usually” cocreated because there are some types of storytelling, such as an audio essay or radio diary, that could be created without interviews or ambient sounds generated by someone other than the documentarian.

through which students learn about urban communication through fieldwork and by making their own cultural artifacts. And we consider audio documentary to be one of many documentary efforts that can be adopted by urban communication instructors seeking to integrate more experiential learning opportunities in their classrooms rather than treating documentary production as solely in the domain of art and mass communication production programs.

Documentary Production Through Community-Based Research

Making Meaning in the Urban Communication Classroom

Michael Rabiger's (1998) assessment of documentary is framed by important changes in access to documentary production tools. He focuses on documentary film and video, but the larger arguments about documentary as a resource for contemplating and representing experiences resonates with a vision of audio documentary as a form of experiential learning. "You and I need not pass silently from life. Future historians will have as their resource documentaries that are grassroots visions, not just what was preserved by an elite and its servants," argues Rabiger (p. 12) about the proliferation of low-cost production options and distribution outlets for documentarians. These tools offer the documentarian opportunities to

create a record of family, friends and surrounds; to pose ideas and questions; and to convey what we see and feel. We can propose the causes, effects, and meanings of the life that we are leading. We can bear witness to these times, reinterpret history, and prophecy the future. (Rabiger, 1998, p. 12)

Rabiger describes the potential for everyday people to help shape historical understanding at a time when documentary recording technologies and nonlinear editing programs were becoming more readily available at much cheaper prices. These technological changes have developed more rapidly since Rabiger's book was published. And an increase in mass communication outlets for documentary means that producers—including students—can connect with audiences that would have been unreachable in the past.

Identifying new outlets for sharing one's work with a broader audience is a topic of conversation among documentarians and scholars working and teaching across academic disciplines. "It seems straightforward: public history should reach the public," argues Benjamin Filene. "Yet museums and historic sites struggle to make history matter to audiences" (2012, p. 11). He is intrigued and inspired by "outsider history-makers" (e.g., genealogists, artists, scrapbookers, bloggers, and interviewers) who engage "history in ways that fire the enthusiasm of thousands" (Filene, p. 12). In line with Filene, our teaching maintains a focus on the amateur; a belief that good stories can come from multiple sources, including, and often foregrounding, everyday voices; and a commitment to curiosity.

There is also potential for student documentary stories to respond to and help shape public memory (at the hyperlocal level, regionally, or nationally, depending on the outlets used to share the work). "All performances of memory," argues Annette Kuhn, are "interactive" and "dynamic" (2010, p.

303). She adds that "memory work is an active process of remembering that takes an inquiring attitude toward the past and activity of its (re)construction through memory" (p. 303). This work is shaped, she claims, by "the medium of the performance or the text" (p. 304) that seeks to tease out the memories. Individual memories then blend with collective memories when creative projects join with others. Kuhn studies photographs and photo albums, and we see a parallel between the photo album and audio documentary. Individual interviews and recordings combine to create a larger story that makes up a documentary, just as photographs come together to form a photo album. In turn, documentaries combine to help shape a sense of urban life in an urban communication context. For example, during our third documentary boot camp, a pair of students worked together on a story about an avant-garde performance experience called *Trapped in a Room with a Zombie*. The participants moved through the space fending off attacks from zombies and making sense of a constructed zombie apocalypse while attempting to escape from the room by successfully completing a series of puzzles, riddles, and other challenges. The students' documentary featured interviews with performers, participants, and a media studies scholar and sounds from the performance experience to reflect on the cultural climate that gives rise to a recent fascination with zombies across popular culture. This documentary focused on the dystopic vision of urban uncertainty (economic recession, fears about global health crises, expansion of discourses about war and terror), but did so by considering playful (or escapist) responses to such struggles.

Another group of students created a story about a very different type of performance event staged at Chicago's Museum Campus at Lake Michigan: *Polar Adventure Days*. This documentary described the family-friendly, health-focused gathering and considered how green spaces can become third places where Chicago residents and tourists come together, even in frigid winter. The lakefront to the east is an alternative backdrop to the more traditional urban built environment that looms large to the west and embodies efforts to maintain green urban places that foster interaction among strangers, or what Ray Oldenburg (1999) has called *third places*.

Both documentaries focus on public life in the context of staged events. More and more such interactions among strangers in the United States occur in spaces that have been designed (often temporarily) for organized occasions. As Oldenburg (1999) notes, the United States has historically lacked an informal public life parallel to that of many European nations. Experiences in the United States are often framed and staged to help people interact during relatively brief moments, as was the case with *Trapped in a Room with Zombies* and *Polar Adventure Days*. Taken together, these two documentaries present listeners with a larger story about public life in Chicago and urban performances more generally. These are not big stories about major events or sensational news. Instead, the students were curious about experiences that emerge from everyday interactions among friends and strangers in public spaces. The experiential learning context put the students in situations where they could interview participants, engage in participant observation work, and consider how the re-presentation of fieldwork through sound recordings can transition them from urban communication consumers to urban communication producers. These efforts to represent everyday life provide a lens through which we can consider how student researchers, participants, and listeners make sense of the urban environment at a micro level.

Entering the Urban Field

"Provel is woven into the fabric of St. Louis food tradition," says Jerry, who narrates a story about Provel cheese during our second boot camp in St. Louis. He then notes that identifying the unique ingredients used to make Provel can be a challenge. "Tony; pizzeria owner Jeff Gieser; and Lucciana, a Provel enthusiast, all take a stab." Jerry's claim previews that we are about to hear some guesswork, but his foreshadowing does not give away the humorous qualities surrounding fluctuations in the participants' confidence (both in words and tone). "Well, it's a blend of five cheeses: mozzarella, Swiss, provolone, American, and I can't remember what the other one is," observes Tony. Jeff starts strong but quickly becomes flustered before finishing with confidence: "I think it's a combination of two types of cheeses. I may be wrong, but, it's, oh, Parmesan and somethin' else." Lucciana is self-assured when it comes to the quantity of cheeses but less so when naming the specific blend. "Oh, I believe there's [*sic*] four cheeses in there, it's muenster, cheddar, Swiss, oh, I can't remember. . . ."

We hear conviction wax and wane in the participants' voices and phrasings as they describe the Provel ingredients. There is something larger at stake when sharing one's knowledge about this local brand of cheese. Interviewees are also expressing an awareness of their city, an insider's unique grasp of a distinctive local food and, by extension, St. Louis itself. Jerry highlights this link between a city and its distinct culinary culture as the documentary's introduction transitions to the body of the story. "Over the course of about 50 years, this simple food item has come to help define a city's identity," he claims. "But, why St. Louis?"

For this story, St. Louis residents were interviewed about this type of cheese because the students were curious about connections between food culture and the city's character. Additionally, their story was animated by a desire to analyze something that wasn't already known by many people outside St. Louis (unlike the Gateway Arch monument, for example) and create a story about everyday life that is less likely to circulate via mainstream media. Of course, the focus on the local in documentary can be replicated in other cities. Listeners outside St. Louis might begin to think about unique foods found in their own cities. In this regard, the Provel piece links the local and the universal, which has become a recurring feature of documentary storytelling across public radio shows in the United States in the past two decades.⁷

Of course, the Provel story could be told through a documentary photography series, a literary journalism story, or a documentary film. But audio offers a unique sensorial experience that often is temporally specific and that uniquely engages the "theater of the mind" (Makagon & Neumann, 2009). Radio, because it has the feeling of one-to-one storytelling—one narrator speaking to one audience member—engages audience members in ways that are uniquely intimate. Intimacy is a recurring theme in discussions among audio documentarians and explicitly considered in multiple manifestos written for Transom.org over the years. Transom is perhaps the preeminent source for audio-documentary practitioners and for people who are curious about the craft (whether that be amateur documentarians,

⁷ The producers of the popular *This American Life* radio show have most explicitly discussed links between a specific local story and larger global lessons (see Abel & Glass, 1999).

students in courses, or dedicated listeners). "I hunger for intimate radio, stories with heart," writes radio producer Rob Rosenthal (2012) in his introduction to the 2012 Transom Spring Workshop. "In fact, Walter Harrington, who used to write for the *Washington Post*, says so much of reporting misses this type of story" (para. 3). And Alix Spiegel (2014) writes in her manifesto that Ira Glass was committed to making *This American Life* an outlet for types of storytelling that had been absent from radio when the show first started. "The work did feel more intimate, and immediate, and it also sounded different from other things that existed at that time" (p. 6), she writes.

The students that we teach in our audio-documentary and digital-storytelling classes have varying levels of production skills. Some enroll in the classes because they are looking to add to their multimedia production backgrounds, and others because the meeting times fit with their schedules. Either way, we have found that students are drawn into the world of audio documentary because of the intimacy they hear in stories played in class and in the stories they create. Moreover, documentaries with an urban focus resonate with our students because they are conducting research in their own neighborhoods. In the same way ethnographers "learn to write ethnographies by reading them" (Goodall, 2000, p. 69), documentarians learn to tell documentary stories by hearing different types of urban stories.

Community-based Learning in the Classroom Without Walls

We approach our classes from the standpoint that the creation of audio documentary is an opportunity to meet people, to hear their stories, and then to find the best ways to re-present those experiences through narration, interview recordings, and sound. Although recording and editing technologies can be the cause of some trepidation for students, we stress that recorders, mics, and editing software programs are simply tools for telling a story and that it is more important for students to focus on finding the right participants, assessing the best way to conduct an interview for a documentary (versus a paper, work report, or journal article), and thinking about storytelling techniques that can engage listeners in unique ways. Technology is secondary to interviewing and crafting a narrative because it is the storytelling choices (e.g., how voices will blend with sound) that will influence the degree to which intimacy is shaped in the documentary.

Our teaching philosophies are grounded in a belief that documentary-production courses are opportunities for experiential education. Assigned readings, course lectures and discussion, and in-class media are standard materials for teaching and learning; however, we develop urban communication courses that begin from a desire to focus on the city as a site to engage one's senses and to encourage students to chase their own interests. We bring students into the field, often working with them or alongside them as we make our own documentaries, as in the case of the documentary boot camp, because we are dedicated to a pedagogical model of a classroom without walls (Makagon, 2013). Students in our classes are encouraged to pursue stories that they are passionate about and that resonate with, but do not necessarily replicate, experiences in their own lives. As Seaman, Beightol, Shirilla, and Crawford note, "Experiential activities give participants the freedom to learn in highly personal ways" (2010, p. 201).

This focus on experiential education facilitates an interaction between students and community members, some of whom work in areas with a more obvious connection to urban communication coursework (e.g., police officers, transportation officials, and people involved with community-service programs) and some of whom have personal experiences that can speak to links between everyday life and the look and feel of a city (e.g., street musicians, locals at a pub, and pizza-delivery drivers). When we discuss techniques that can help students identify participants for documentaries, we stress that the story should guide most aspects of the fieldwork and that there is no single model for telling a documentary story. That is, experts are needed in certain stories, so-called ordinary people are fitting for other pieces, and a blend of participants make still other documentaries most engaging. Fieldwork experiences will in turn shape a revised vision of the story. What's most important is that community-based learning links students to their cities and to the people that inhabit them.

"Community-based learning refers to any pedagogical tool in which the community becomes a partner in the learning process," write Linda Mooney and Bob Edwards (2001, p. 182). Collaborative learning activities and interactions enable "students to see, hear, and smell places and meet the people who frequent them. Students with no such prior experiences no longer have to imagine a place, its people, or its sights, sounds, and smells" (Mooney & Edwards, 2001, p. 185). Often an outcome to community-based urban documentary projects is that students return with stories about places, people, or events that were unfamiliar to them before they completed their stories. As one student remarked after participating in the first documentary boot camp, "Getting out and recording the story wasn't motivated by just logistics or a grade. It was an authentic drive to find out more about the city I live in." At the same time, boot camp participants were put in the position of introducing group members from the other university to their city. Acting as urban ambassadors was also appealing to the students, as one participant commented: "Beyond the project, it is a true joy to be able to help a visitor explore your home. To show them something unique to your city, which they can't get anywhere else."

In addition to students engaging their lived environment through hosting new colleagues in their city and through collective experiential learning, audio-documentary projects offer opportunities to reassess relationships between one's senses and the city. Paul Stoller (1989) argues for the importance of considering the senses during fieldwork, complementing the claims made by Mooney and Edwards about knowing the sounds, smell, and feel of one's environment through experiential learning. That is, according to Stoller, fieldworkers need to consider the spectrum of sensorial phenomena. We were both drawn to audio-documentary storytelling as an alternative to the emphasis of the visual to the detriment of other senses in qualitative research. Audio documentary, as we noted previously, can offer students unique opportunities to learn the city through sound. This happens through careful consideration of interview content and critically assessment of the ways that ambient sounds can help tell a story. "If radio is like a magazine, ambient sounds are the photographs," writes Robin White (2001, para. 1). "Words alone can tell a lot, but the right piece of ambient sound can give the listener a sense of having 'been there,' listening along with you" (White, 2001, para. 1). One way that we encourage students to create these sonic snapshots is to have them listen to the city through different microphones. A short shotgun mic can pick up sounds at a distance within a narrow spatial field, whereas an omnidirectional microphone fans out to capture a wider sonic area. After hearing the unique features of each microphone, students can then consider which one will help them record the sounds that are most fitting for the stories they create in our

classes. Again, such choices are more than mere window dressing in a production process; rather, recording ambient sounds is another opportunity for students to learn about the city through aural experiences.

Once students understand the ways to collect sounds through different microphones, we put their knowledge into practice with a soundscape assignment. Murray Schafer (1994) notes that soundscapes are acoustic fields that take many forms. There are different types of soundscape recordings (Makagon & Neumann, 2009), but we ask our students to record natural soundscapes. For example, students are assigned specific intersections in a local neighborhood and asked to record sounds there during an eight-minute window. The recordings will range from light traffic sounds with some pedestrian footsteps in less busy areas to more dense recordings that feature a good mix of action in an urban environment: different types of traffic, commuter trains, groups of people talking, footsteps, and skateboards surfing the pavement. Students inevitably return to class with a new appreciation for the aural landscape of the city and a genuine realization of how sound, absent of visual translation, can tell a compelling story about the everyday ebbs and flows of the city.

This assignment, like the documentary boot camp, is designed to encourage students to consider the important role of intimacy in documentary recordings and to create opportunities for students to engage with the urban environment through the senses. The soundscape assignment, a precursor to the larger audio-documentary project, introduces students (at a meta level) to the various ways that community-based learning can broaden opportunities to encounter strange and familiar features of one's city.

Conclusion: From Solo Consumption to Collective Production

Adopting experiential education pedagogies not only integrates students into the daily life of the city for the purposes of learning, but this type of learning in a documentary-production context can also encourage students to reassess their relationships to media as consumers and as producers. Marina Peterson notes that "media imbue one's experience in the city, whether in domestic domains or as one moves through its public space" (2010, p. 64). From the cellular phone map that represents a user in space and the direction she or he is moving to the electronic billboards offering opportunities to purchase self-improvement, media are used and consumed in multiple and complicated ways. But media production technologies can also help student researchers hear the city uniquely.

We seek to inspire students to consider the ways that creating documentary stories can reach a broad audience via radio, podcasts, and Internet sites. We also have found that for many students, these classes are their first encounters with creating content, which often challenges the assumption that today's students are technologically savvy simply because they can easily navigate social media sites. Moreover, we discuss with students the range of recording and editing options that have proliferated in recent years, although we temper an enthusiasm about the democratic features of low-cost recording options with discussions of high-quality recording gear to highlight the differences between types of recording packages and sound quality. We always ask our students to work with the best possible equipment in our classes—equipment that our universities have purchased for production projects—

because professional-quality recorders, mics, and headphones lead to better recordings. Because we have access to high-quality recording equipment, we discourage students from using their own equipment (cell phones or other digital recorders) that tend to yield lower quality recordings.⁸

The documentary boot camp is particularly interesting for us because this assignment links collective experiences and shared knowledge with individual understanding and growth. "Individual learning styles are shaped by the structure of social knowledge and through individual creative acts," argues David Kolb (1984, p. 99). In-class group discussion and projects can certainly create opportunities for dialogue and collective learning; however, field studies tend to change the dynamic among the students. We have observed that urban documentary projects provide a context for students to learn from each other in the field rather than to depend solely on the instructor for teaching. Learning is collaborative. At the same time, students are exposed to nuanced approaches to doing documentary work because each brings an individualized learning style into a collective process. Similar to the traditional classroom, students read, listen to, and discuss the same stories and lectures, but when they begin fieldwork, they are each presented with different parts of the city that feature diverse voices, sounds, sights, and smells that all influence the stories they create. Then each group comes back to the lab to produce the final project. While group work certainly does present challenges, it offers a glimpse into media production work environments beyond the campus and places students in the position to navigate and negotiate the story-making process. Students in the boot camp learn to depend on the pre- and post-production support of their classmates, and, in the end, find the collaborative process rewarding. As one student remarked, "Having group members is healthy for a project such as this type of documentary, particularly since it's easy to lose your perspective when you're working on something so intensely, so I simultaneously appreciated everyone's involvement."

We have found the weekend-long boot camp to be the out-of-class assignment sweet spot that blends collective fieldwork and urban communication practice. "From field trips, a class shares a stock of common images that facilitates discussion and can foster camaraderie among students and between students and the instructor," note Mooney and Edwards (2001, p. 185). These trips can range in length, but unfortunately most instructors do not have opportunities to travel with students during a normal school term. Therefore, projects like the documentary boot camp (offered during the weekend, a time when students would not likely have other classes) or taking students outside the classroom for brief periods, such as for the soundscape assignment discussed previously, can achieve participation and learning goals on a smaller scale. As one boot camp participant commented, "It's [boot camp] certainly intense and demanding, but I also like that it forces you to quickly get things done. I think many in my position would agree that we're too overwhelmed with classes and other responsibilities to obsess about such projects throughout the whole semester without getting completely burnt out or overwhelmed." At the same time, the student also felt the learning objectives were not compromised by the shortened work period: "I feel as if I've learned just as much as I would have with more conventional assignments so, again, I think the format is very conducive to a one-semester class with students juggling other responsibilities."

⁸ See the "Tools" section at Transom.org for information about the qualities of different recording packages.

Collaborative documentary projects also foster engagement with a broader public, which takes shape in two ways. First, students interview people to learn more about the topic at hand and to gather interview recordings for their documentaries. Also, returning to Rabiger's belief that documentarians can participate in a larger narrative about contemporary and historical life, we encourage our students to treat their work as more than class projects designed to earn a grade and fulfill an assignment; rather, making choices about participants, researching topics, and crafting narratives are opportunities to introduce listeners to new stories about the city or alternative ways of hearing old stories. We urge our students to think of themselves as translators of culture and to consider their work public. All too often students engage in work that is private: writing a paper that is read only by the professor and then returned with a grade. While it is not a requirement that students send their work out for public distribution (on community or public radio stations, Internet sites, or social media outlets), we do push students to find homes for their documentaries, and we make suggestions that will facilitate this shift from course project to publicly available documentary.

Again, to consider audio-documentary production as more than the simple fulfillment of an assignment for a specific class is to begin to understand how storytelling helps shape our sense of an urban past, present, and future. The documentary assignment puts students in situations where they engage with interview participants, do participant-observation fieldwork, and consider how the representation of this fieldwork through sound recordings can transition them from urban-communication consumers to urban-communication producers. As the rhetorician Walter Fisher argued, humans are "in action and practice, as well as in [their] fictions, essentially story-telling animal[s]" (1984, p. 1). During the process of making an audio documentary, students can be "directly in touch with the realities being studied" (Keeton & Tate, 1978, p. 2). The experiential dimensions of this type of coursework are further developed when students are able to take listeners into a scene, to show listeners rather than simply tell listeners. "Always try to record the sound of what people do," instructs Robin White "If you weren't there, what would they be doing right now? What does that sound like?" (2001, para. 10).

This ability to show through sound is in part a product of quality preparation (which can be more difficult in a 36-hour window) and being able to consider a range of possibilities that can emerge if participants are asked good questions. Students have 36 hours in this assignment to form a team; record, edit, and narrate; and then be ready to present. All the while, some parts of each team are negotiating a new city as they all struggle with temporal limits. Participating in the boot camp allows all of us to dwell in the serendipity of short projects.

The stories created during our documentary boot camp assignment have reflected a range of urban experiences and have been recorded in different types of neighborhoods. And these audio pieces highlight how the two cities from which we work (Chicago and St. Louis) share similar features but also offer distinct opportunities to learn about unique spaces and practices. In the end, we have found this assignment and the other experiential-learning assignments we have created in our audio-documentary and digital-storytelling classes to be important opportunities for students to learn about urban communication, to understand better how symbolic action frames and explains the ways that urban experiences are created, maintained, repaired, and transformed. Students are not only exposed to a body of diverse theories and applications but also introduced to ways of *doing* urban communication through

documentary fieldwork. This community-based experiential-learning process ultimately has students engaging with the city as a site of significant cultural production and meaning.

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