COMM 398-001 . FILMMAKING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE . SPRING 2026
MKC 120 . MONDAYS 12:20-3PM . 3 CREDITS
BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY

You must understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story.
Anthony de Mello

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Office Hours: Mondays 3-4pm
Thursdays 10am-12pm
Sign up at calendly.com/colleenkellypoplin

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores how moving image storytelling can amplify community voices, confront systems of injustice, and support real-world advocacy. Students will apply core production skills to create short films in collaboration with local social justice organizations, with a focus on ethical representation, emotional resonance, and the strategic use of cinematic tools to inspire change.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Through readings, screenings, community engagement, and hands-on production, we will attempt to answer these questions:

- How can film and digital media be used as tools for advocacy, activism, and social change?
- What are the responsibilities of the storyteller when representing marginalized voices and lived experiences?
- How can collaboration with community partners shape the production process and strengthen the final work?
- What does it mean to create compelling, emotionally resonant media that also moves people to action?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Apply filmmaking techniques to create digital media projects that address social justice issues
- Collaborate with community partners to develop stories that reflect the mission of a nonprofit or advocacy organization
- Demonstrate critical awareness of power, privilege, and positionality in the representation of communities on screen
- Manage all stages of a creative workflow, from concept development and scheduling to production and feedback
- Navigate the emotional, ethical, and technical complexities of advocacy filmmaking with care, curiosity, and responsibility

COURSE READINGS / REQUIRED EQUIPMENT

We will use resources from Doc Society's *Impact Field Guide and Toolkit.* All readings and handouts will be available on Blackboard.

You will have access to BSU cameras, lights, microphones, Adobe Premiere software, and other equipment for your projects. Equipment access is limited, so reserve all gear as early as possible. We will go over the equipment checkout process in greater detail in class. If you would like to use your own camera, microphones, lights, etc., let's have a conversation. You need the following:

- One external hard drive, at least 1TB
- One or two SDXC memory card(s), at least 128GB
- *Recommended:* Adobe Premiere Pro Complete Beginner's Guide
- *Recommended:* production is easier with a multi-tool (I have a Gerber Truss 17-in-1 Multitool)

GRADING

This course is based on the principle that the more you practice, the better you become. Use every assignment to communicate what is important to you and take risks. You will earn your grade via the following:

Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis	15%
Concept Development Lab	15%
Community Partner Collaboration	30%
Collaborative Final Project	25%
Professionalism	15%

93 to 100% = A
90 to 92.9% = A-
87 to 89.9% = B+
83 to 86.9% = B
80 to 82.9% = B-
77 to 79.9% = C+
73 to 76.9% = C
70 to 72.9% = C-
67 to 69.9% = D+
63 to 66.9% = D
60 to 62.9% = D-
0 to 59.9% = F

ASSIGNMENTS

Further details on all assignments will be shared in class. Use Blackboard to keep yourself organized.

Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis (15% of final grade)

Select a fiction or documentary film that engages explicitly with a social justice issue and present a focused analysis of how the film functions as advocacy. In addition to a brief summary of the film, examine how cinematic choices are used to inform, persuade, or motivate an audience toward social change. Your presentation should include:

- Curated clips that demonstrate key advocacy strategies
- A clear articulation of the film's goal(s) and intended audience
- Analysis of storytelling strategies such as structure, perspective, tone, and ethics
- Discussion of specific cinematic techniques used to advance the film's message

Share specific moments from the film and explain how they operate as tools of persuasion, awareness, or resistance. This assignment develops your ability to critically evaluate social justice media and prepares you to make intentional advocacy choices in your own filmmaking. Details will be shared in class.

- Presentation dates TBD

Concept Development Lab: *What Would You Make If You Had the Time and Money?* (15% of final grade)

You will complete a concept development project centered on a social justice film you would like to make yourself. If time and money were no object, what story would you want to tell? This assignment gives you space to explore your own interests while practicing a crucial stage of the filmmaking process: early development. You may choose one of the following formats:

- Visual Pitch Deck: Create a concise pitch deck (6-8 slides) that introduces your proposed project. Your deck should clearly communicate the central story or issue, intended audience, advocacy goal, and overall tone. Visual references should be used to convey style, mood, and approach.

- Teaser / Concept Trailer: Create a short teaser or concept trailer (60-90 seconds) that communicates the tone, themes, and social justice focus of your proposed film. This may include staged footage, archival material, or other audiovisual elements.

- Written Treatment + Visual References: Write a 2- to 3-page treatment outlining your proposed project, including the central issue, narrative or documentary approach, ethical considerations, and intended impact. You should also include visual references that help communicate tone and style.

Regardless of format, your project should demonstrate a clear social justice focus, intentional storytelling choices, and thoughtful consideration of audience and impact. Details will be shared in class.

- Proposal (3/16)
- Completed project (3/30)

Community Partner Collaboration (30% of final grade)

You will work in small production teams to collaborate with a campus-based social justice organization to plan, pitch, and produce advocacy media that supports the organization's mission. This collaboration is a professional, client-based production experience and an excellent résumé builder. Teams will participate in three structured meetings with their assigned community partner:

- Initial Planning Meeting (2/9): You will meet with your partner organization to learn about their mission, goals, and media needs. This meeting focuses on asking thoughtful questions and identifying potential directions for the project. You are required to record this session.

- Pitch Meeting (3/2): You will present a proposed concept to your client and explain your creative approach. Be prepared to receive and discuss feedback. You are required to record this session.

- Rough Cut Feedback Session (4/13): You will share a rough cut of the project and receive notes from your client. You are expected to engage professionally with feedback and discuss how revisions will be implemented. You are required to record this session.

Collaborative Final Project (25% of final grade)

Working in collaboration with your assigned community partner, your team will produce an advocacy media project that supports the organization's mission and communication goals. This project represents the culmination of your planning, production, and revision process over the course of the semester.

The format, length, and structure of the final media will be guided by your partner's needs. All projects should be aligned with the partner's mission and demonstrate intentional storytelling, ethical representation, strong technical execution in image and sound, and meaningful incorporation of partner feedback. Projects will be screened for the class and shared with the partner organization for use at their discretion. Details will be shared in class.

- Rough Cut (4/13)
- Completed project (5/4)

WHAT DO I MEAN BY PROFESSIONALISM?

- Communicate with me if you need to miss class and reach out to me when you have questions. The growth you gain from this class will directly reflect the effort you invest in it.
- Read your email and pay attention to Blackboard. Meet deadlines.
- Use every project to share what is important to you. Take risks.
- Research shows that the use of electronics reduces academic performance for users *and* nearby students. Do not use devices during lectures or screenings unless you have an accommodation. Do your peers a solid and get a notebook.
- Treat me and your peers with respect. Always.

DRAFT SCHEDULE

Syllabus is subject to change, but you will always be informed. See Blackboard for more details.

Week 1: January 26	- Snow day! - *Note: the unexpected late start means we'll be moving quickly to prepare for initial client meetings*
Week 2: February 2	- Get to know each other - Syllabus review - What is filmmaking for social justice? What is social justice? - Prepare for initial planning meeting with social justice organizations
Week 3: February 9	- Meet in production teams to continue preparing for initial planning meeting - **Initial Planning Meeting with social justice organizations (1-2pm)** - Submit meeting recording - Determine presentation dates
Week 4: February 18 (Wed)	- **NO CLASS!** - Meet in production teams to prepare for pitch meeting on 3/2
Week 5: February 23	- Ethics and representation in advocacy filmmaking - Consent, positionality, and authorship - Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis (1, 2, 3) - Pitch check-ins with Colleen
Week 6: March 2	- Meet in production teams to continue preparing for pitch meeting - **Pitch Meeting with social justice organizations (1-2pm)** - Submit meeting recording - Next week is Spring Break; see you on 3/16
Week 7: March 16	- Concept Development Lab discussion and proposal - Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis (4, 5, 6)
Week 8: March 23	- Capturing truth through image and sound - Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis (7, 8, 9) - In-class production workshop

Week 9: March 30	- **Concept Development Lab projects due** - Screen projects and provide feedback - In-class production workshop
Week 10: April 6	- Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis (10, 11, 12) - In-class production workshop
Week 11: April 13	- **Rough Cut due** - **Rough Cut Feedback Session with social justice organizations (1-2pm)** - Submit meeting recording - Feedback integration and continued postproduction - Next week is Patriots' Day; see you on 4/27
Week 12: April 27	- Presentation: Social Justice Storytelling Analysis (13, 14, 15) - In-class production workshop - Feedback integration and continued postproduction
Week 13: May 4	- **Collaborative Final Project due** - Screen projects and provide feedback
Week 14: May 6-12	- Collaborative Final Project feedback sessions - Cry about how much we will miss each other

SUPPORT RESOURCES

Academic Achievement Center (AAC)
On the ground floor of the Maxwell Library, the AAC provides academic advising, learning assistance (both tutoring and academic coaching), and testing services. There is also support available for English language learners. To make an appointment for tutoring or academic coaching, sign into bridgew.accudemia.net using your BSU credentials.

Student Accessibility Services (SAS)
SAS is in the Rondileau Student Union, Suite 106. You can connect with SAS by scheduling online, reaching out via email, or by calling 508-531-2194.

Wellness Center
The Wellness Center (Weygand Hall) offers a range of vital services and support to help you achieve physical and emotional wellness. Whether you need physical or mental health advice, assistance in a crisis, tips for managing stress, or care for a specific condition, the Wellness Center will hook you up.

Maxwell Library
For borrowing or renewing items, access to computers, study rooms, and more, visit the Maxwell Library.

Information Technology (IT)
For all technology questions and assistance, the Information Technology Division provides Student Technology Support on the ground floor of the Maxwell Library and through the IT Self Service Portal.

Career Services & Internships
The Career Services & Internships Office can be found in the Rondileau Student Union. They offer programs and resources for your future career. Side note: their website links to an external resource I recommend called *What Can I Do with This Major?*

Financial Assistance
The Financial Aid Office is on West Campus in the Welcome Center. They can assist you and your family in affording the cost of your education through grants, loans, student work programs, and financial counselors. There is also a Student Emergency Fund if you need help purchasing course supplies. If you are having trouble accessing food to eat, I highly recommend BSU's Food Pantry on the lower level of Rondileau Student Union.

Office of Equal Opportunity and Title IX
The Office of Equal Opportunity and the Title IX Coordinator work to ensure that all members of the campus community flourish in a supportive and fair climate. Their website has a page for Title IX and a page for Discrimination and Harassment for reporting concerns of sexual violence, relationship violence, stalking, sexual harassment, or protected category-based discrimination and harassment. Additionally, the Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center is a *confidential* support resource for anyone who has experienced sexual, gender-based, or relationship violence or stalking. Seek support via this form: SVAS Center Support Form

Pride Center
BSU's Pride Center supports gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students and their allied peers to foster a campus climate of inclusion and equity. Visit the Pride Center website to learn more about their services and events.