

Filmmaking for the Blind

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Abstract

A teacher, a therapist and a filmmaker gathered a group of 9 high school age, partially sighted and blind students to do a creative video project. The project consisted of weekly two-hour sessions from November 1998 through March 1999.

What Was The Project?

But the reason we are telling this story is that more than this has been achieved with this experiment. Students are playing in the field of sight—one student has no sight at all, but he sees himself as a detective solving a case, he writes his lines, he does the part and listens to all comment on his performance. This class has given students the thrill of putting a show together. And the result has been motivation on the first order.

We call it a class video project—a video portrait—a video time capsule. The goal is to do stuff that we can look at later and say here is our show.

We started out by talking about what might be fun to achieve—we thought about doing some personal statements and allowing each student to do some singing or recite poetry, and add music from CD's of their choosing. So we had a plan—a backup—a reasonable suggestion. Then we sat down with the class to see how far they wanted to go—what they would and could achieve.

Student's names have been changed for respect of privacy.

Week 1

We all sit together, get to know each other, go around the room telling our own personal story—a little honesty—teachers included. I know I want personal statements from each student in the final video, and the rest is up for grabs. When we suggest a few ideas for the project, Pablo, a totally blind student, suggests a detective story, and another student suggests that Tom (who is often late) is missing and the goal is to find him. All seem to like that, and we are off and running. I plan to shoot personal statements and keep the script writing going over the weeks.

Week 2

We start the personal statements. One student handles the mike placement (lavaleir mike must be mounted on shirt) and we take turns asking each other the questions. Every student must ask a set of questions.

1. What is your name, age, and visual impairment?
2. What do you see, what kinds of things can you do and not do?
3. Where do you see yourself in 10 years, what are your goals?
4. What obstacles do you foresee and how will you handle them?
5. If you could give someone with your condition some advice, what would it be?

I plan to shoot other footage of each person was shot as an action sequence to add "B Roll" to the interviews.

Week 3

Script discussion. Teacher, David says "These kids are highly motivated, we are going to milk this for all it's worth" And class time has been spent on story development.

These stories are not difficult—all that is necessary is to have a problem and actors trying to solve it as obstacles arise—it can be as simple or complex as you want to make it.

Week 4

It seems like each meeting brings up a new lesson—both for me and the students. Today the assignment was to finish up a pass at a final script. After reading, several parts did not make sense. My concern was how much should be their idea and how much should I interject. In trying to allow each student to say their idea, the class started to lose interest—joking and daydreaming. I was even scattered and could not concentrate—we were losing it. I regained control by going back to the part in the script we all agreed on and working from there.

"Ok, who committed the crime?"

"What were they feeling?"

With answers to these questions, I ask if everyone agrees. Then we ease into the first problem area, Someone offers a solution, I cut them off from rambling, and when I get their idea, I paraphrase it and offer it up for an informal vote.

I realize they are not prepared to work too hard at a consensus, and that I must teach the procedure.

We come to some conclusions and adjourn. I ask three to stay later and we work with a smaller group. It is easier, but we still have to speak in turn, listen carefully, think about what was said, evaluate and record. It finally worked. Consensus: Lesson of the day.

Another positive element that day was the delight I felt in hearing these kids speaking in visual terms, even though the rambling mentioned before was counter productive to consensus, it was beautiful to hear partially blind students visualizing the story.

“Then one of the girls drops the key and no one sees—but the camera notices a key on the floor and one of the boys moving it toward him with his foot” and I see these kids closing their weak eyes and just letting the mind take over. I would guess their mental vision was 20-20.

Week 5.

Now we have a script, and almost any idea works because the main thread holds. It is fun. At the final reading everyone burst into spontaneous applause. We plan to shoot next time. I allow 2 hours, and plan to direct as in a master class, but I will just make sure we have sensible cuts and transitions—that the story—all be it far fetched—is clearly told. We will encourage them to take over as soon as they get the feel of the process.

There is awareness in the group that we are venturing into uncharted territory and everyone is quite pleased with the challenge. It's like climbing a mountain.

Week 6-7: The Shoot

I arrive at 1:00 PM and we plan to shoot the 11 page very large type script in 2-3 hours. We're dreaming of course. We start setting up the shots, the lights, we're having fun, the kids are improvising in the scenes. We use the microphone on camera—the sound will not be perfect, but given the time constraints—we shoot for fun, and leave the production values on hold. We're all loving it, I have a concept of how to shoot, and the kids are in the movies. There's Debbie the “Starlet” The two blind detectives. They can't really walk without canes, so we shoot with them already placed. We let them do some improv as to what they are thinking as detectives right before someone enters. Pablo seems to have a good idea of himself as a detective. He is really shining. And David is the straight man, his partner who listens, and has a few lines to be placed in and around Pablo's improv.

At the end of three hours, we are worn out, I say let's keep shooting, thinking how nice it would be to complete. But after a moment of thought, I realize: This project is not about finishing the shoot, it's about the process, the fun of partially sighted kids being part of a visual world, it's about imagination, it's about discovery, it's about looking at challenges and having fun solving them, it's about an adventure, it's not about learning to finish on time. So I say: “Let's call it a day.” We had a blast, let's finish next week. And we break.

Another thing. June says that I was loose with the kids, and they seemed a little rowdy, joking around with ideas. Well, yes, the atmosphere was a little bubbly, but I did not want to sacrifice the creativity for control. And I knew when the command was “Quiet on the set” that there was total cooperation. They were not rebelling against anything, they were just happy, and I, as a filmmaker am listening to their jokes, seeing if anything is good enough to use.

After the Shoot

We finish shooting. I do a full day's work on the edit and show the class. After the taping, I interview all to get their reaction. I sense they all liked it, but realized that it was certainly not comparable to commercial movie making. No problem. But I ask them to each take a turn with an introduction. Here we have a lot of life, enthusiasm, pride. However one boy is laughing, trying, in my estimation to sabotage the process. We finish with plenty of good footage, but I go home angry this one boy's disruption. But after thinking, I realize the unexpressed sadness he must have—partially sighted and going totally blind—a sharp kid, with great aspirations, of being a video game programmer. I conclude that having such a kid in class must be like having a family—you kind of have to take each for who they are, regardless.

We are quite pleased with the project and decide to do a premiere showing at the school, I add complete narration for the video: "Our Little Secret" so the totally blind will follow.

The Premiere

About six weeks after completion of the project, several classes were invited to attend the premiere showing. A projector and good sound system made the showing an entertaining event. Cake and sodas were served. Each student was given a VHS copy of the video. This was a fantastic experience for all involved.