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Reimagining Doctoral Research:

Documentary Filmmaking to Advance Social Change

Amna Jaffer
San José State University
amna.jaffer@sjsu.edu

Radha Aravamudhan
San José State University
radha.aravamudhan@sjsu.edu

Kristina Grasty
San José State University
kristi.grasty@sjsu.edu

ABSTRACT

Documentary filmmaking is presented as a viable research component to doctoral programs in education that center social change. Documentary filmmaking is an established and valid qualitative research option that utilizes academic research skills, critical analysis, and creativity to convey significant findings regarding social issues to a broad audience. The documentary filmmaking format provides doctoral candidates meaningful ways to represent themselves and their specific perspectives in relation to the identified problems of practice. The benefits of utilizing documentary filmmaking as a research method include recording authentic voices of individuals directly associated with the problem of practice, thereby effectively elucidating nuances of the challenges as experienced and spotlighting potential solutions to address the specific problem. Other benefits of this alternative method include broader dissemination, more expansive viewership, and serving as a model form of research to advance social change.

KEYWORDS

alternative dissertation, non-traditional doctoral candidates, social change, documentary filmmaking research method

University graduate programs that offer a Doctor of Education (EdD) degree do not widely promote an extensive variety of research methods beyond standard qualitative and quantitative approaches (Anderson et al., 2022; Duke & Beck, 1999). However, those EdD programs with faculty who support alternative research methods, such as documentary filmmaking, broaden and deepen the academic landscape by allowing equally rigorous and creative forms to contribute to the canon of scholarly work.

For a period of seven years (2017-2024), the EdD in Educational Leadership Program at San José State University (SJSU), a public university in California, offered documentary filmmaking as an option for conducting qualitative research with an advisor (Dr. R. Gliner). Gliner, a PhD in Sociology, specialized in making documentary films to advocate for social change and was a long-time professor at SJSU. Gliner served as the dissertation chair for all three authors of this paper (Dr. A. Jaffer, Dr. R. Aravamudhan, and Dr. K. Grasty) and guided the process of conducting documentary research for doctoral projects that resulted in the creation of a film as a final product, in addition to a five-chapter written dissertation. While the three of us approached this alternative qualitative research method from slightly different angles, we can speak confidently from experience about the value of conducting documentary research in its ability 1) to augment the level of engagement and relatability of the end product to a broader audience, 2) to extend greater possibilities for the research to have positive social impact, and 3) to provide a powerful avenue of creative expression for non-traditional doctoral candidates.

Limitations of the Traditional Dissertation Format

While the origins of the doctoral dissertation can be traced to the 1880s in Germany, one can fairly argue that not much regarding the standard PhD dissertation format has changed since the latter half of the 20th century when a five-chapter dissertation format became more widely adopted in universities in the United States (Duke & Beck, 1999). Duke and Beck point out that the standard five-chapter dissertation model has remained relatively static despite significant technological and digital communication advancements over the past fifty years (1999). Critics acknowledge serious issues regarding the traditional five-chapter dissertation such as variation in evaluation standards, assessment disparities, lack of transparency, scant attention to critical self-management skills, insufficient training to pursue other scholarly work, and paucity of publications (Gould, 2016; Porter et al., 1982).

Dissertations are a tangible product of doctoral studies and the fundamental form of dissemination of the research conducted (Thomas et al., 1986). However, only a third to half of them are published and therefore made accessible to the profession and professionals in the field (Porter et al., 1982). The publishing rate is even lower in the counseling related and professional applied fields

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such as education, as these professionals generally do not see the publishing of their dissertations as advantageous to their work or their advancement (Evans et al., 2018). The low rate of publishing constitutes a serious limitation to the traditional dissertation format which, although publicly available through digital means, has very limited reach and thus restricts an opportunity for creating change and having impact. When the research does not contribute to practitioner knowledge, there is arguably a breach of trust. Evans et al. (2018) go as far as to contend that the lack of dissemination of research violates ethical standards of human subject research.

The traditional dissertation format does not fully meet the current needs of researchers in fields such as the humanities and social sciences, as it does not allow for the breadth and depth of research that educational researchers may wish to utilize to appropriately investigate a specific problem of practice. Kamler and Thomson (2008) argue that traditional doctoral dissertation guidance "involves a habituated transmission pedagogy that ignores the knowledge and life experiences of doctoral researchers" (p. 514). Moreover, Tilford and South (2003) note that there remains a lack of commitment to participatory research reflected in dissertations and inadequate emphasis on the needs of practitioner researchers for whom publication is not the foremost method of addressing problems of practice.

The Educational Doctorate Lends Itself to Using Alternative Approaches

A feature that distinguishes the EdD dissertation from a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dissertation is that it targets a problem of practice (Ma et al., 2018). Ma et al. (2018) conducted research involving EdD students who focused on "highly contextualized problems of practice that were sometimes addressed with direct action, and sometimes more of an exploration of tensions around abiding dilemmas" (p. 20). From their research, they offered four principles to assist EdD students with focusing on a problem of practice. The principles Ma et al. suggested relate to the problems of practice being 1) directly relevant and integral to the student practitioners' professional practice and work context, 2) emanating from actual dilemmas and problems students face as practitioners, 3) aligning with issues that are demonstrably relevant and critical in the field of education, and 4) further developing and enhancing the student's professional identity as a practitioner and scholar (2018).

Problems of practice that educational researchers often choose to examine happen to be situated in specific, localized places and spaces (i.e., school settings). The use of alternative research methods allows the doctoral student in education an ability to more closely investigate and study intricate nuances of a problem of practice in a local context, showcasing real dilemmas as they are lived. The authors of this article would like to make a case that there is room to add alternative research methods and forms, such as documentary filmmaking, to doctoral research. Given a respectable place as a valid research method, documentary filmmaking could be offered as an option to students in EdD programs across the country.

Alternative, creative research methods can be used to 1) complement a five-chapter dissertation by adding it as a key project, 2) reconstitute components of a dissertation such as the results chapter, or 3) replace the dissertation form entirely and constitute a new doctoral track in which the documentary film may be accompanied with a bibliography and/or an analytical reflection paper. The authors understand that the adaptability of EdD programs to embrace documentary filmmaking as an alternative track option might take time, but from our experience alone, we advocate for considering its inclusion in the canon of research options in the broadest scope possible.

Forms of Alternative Dissertations

Exploring alternate forms of dissertations offers universities an opportunity to democratize academic scholarship. Academic work is generally produced for a narrow audience and contradicts the broader purpose of sharing knowledge (Evans et al., 2018). Williams (n.d.) makes this point quite emphatically in an interview discussing Williams' dissertation that was produced as a podcast. In the podcast trailer, Williams speaks of the ivory tower being exclusionary to those individuals who do not fit the traditional academic norms (Willams, 2020). Williams follows an emerging trend of scholars who have conceptualized their dissertations to meet the requirements for their degrees while leveraging the strengths of alternate forms of expression that are far more impactful than text alone. For example, Nick Sousanis' doctoral dissertation was submitted in the form of graphic art to Teachers College in 2014 (Sossi, 2017), Rebecca Zak (2014) produced a dissertation for a PhD in education using a series of YouTube videos and a blog, Daria Loi's (2004) dissertation consisted of a suitcase full of artifacts, and Sonia Estima's (2020) doctoral dissertation is a series of videos with accompanying text in a website format.

The widespread use of the internet, which has provided easy access to digital tools and social media, has revolutionized ways to communicate, learn, research, and grow on a personal and communal level. YouTube videos and content, podcasts, webinars, websites, LinkedIn Learning, blogs, vlogs, and other internet media are being used by individuals worldwide, both in formal education and informally for personal use. With so many new tools available, it stands to reason that the dissertation format would be subject to pressures to adapt in form and function to compete with readily available knowledge in a variety of forms.

Expanding Inclusion Through Alternative Dissertation Forms

The academic community and society as a whole stand to benefit from the inclusion of alternative forms of dissertations that represent a variety of non-traditional voices. Non-traditional doctoral researchers include women, individuals with disabilities, students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, full-time employees, undocumented individuals, refugees, and members of minority and under-represented groups (Engels-Schwarzpaul & Peters, 2013; Timus et al., 2024). Forcing non-traditional students into traditional formats can make the doctoral process frustrating and futile, leading to inauthentic work. An alternative dissertation format or alternate doctoral track allows for a variety of topics and research styles that are more representative of non-traditional candidates. In fact, Engels-Schwarzpaul and Peters (2013) posit that instead of viewing the non-traditional student as lacking or not meeting the set standards, the truth is that non-traditional students are enriching academia and research processes by stretching the boundaries of what has been deemed the norm.

Non-traditional doctoral candidates add new perspectives, giving birth to non-dominant narratives, provoking new insights into the dissertation research process, giving rise to new fields, and driving innovative approaches (Engels-Schwarzpaul & Peters 2013).

Moreover, Timus et al. (2024) emphasized that Inclusive Pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning are ways for educational programs to create learning environments that reduce inequities and promote social change. Learners with divergent styles and nontraditional backgrounds are empowered with options for decolonized forms of knowledge building, representation, and expression (Timus et al., 2024). Certainly, it makes sense to expand research methodologies and dissertation forms to be more inclusive of the array of candidates currently pursuing educational doctorates to examine a wide range of problems of practice.

The Legitimacy of Documentary Filmmaking as Qualitative Research

Documentary films are a decades-old medium used for social activism and as a platform for change. The documentary method has been recognized as a rigorous method in qualitative research as visual and video ethnography since the 1960s when it was first developed in Germany (Bohnsack et al., 2010). The documentary method has gained popularity (Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020) and made an entry into the academic world to generate and disseminate knowledge (Morgan et al., 2019).

Fitzgerald and Lowe (2020) articulated the position of "documentary filmmaking as a legitimate approach to informing the collection and analysis of research data rather than simply being a research output relying on audio-visual methods" (p. 3). Utilizing documentary film as a qualitative research format allows for greater transparency of the research process, due to authentic visual images and voices recorded in real time (Weber, 2008). Qualitative research using the documentary film method involves experiential understanding; the researcher's role in conducting qualitative research tends to be more personal than impersonal (Stake, 2010). Documentary filmmaking involves a qualitative researcher making observations, collecting interviews, and analyzing narratives (i.e., the research artifacts), which require substantial personal engagement with the process (Stake, 2010). Furthermore, the process of creating a documentary film provides participants with an opportunity to speak directly for themselves as they share personal experiences and ideas (Kemmitt, 2007). Documentary filming can be a powerful tool to acknowledge participants' funds of knowledge and engage them as active creators rather than passive subjects (Friend & Militello, 2015). The video recordings allow for transparency of the research processes (Weber, 2008) and bring forth a visual narrative of what happened rather than an imaginative interpretation of what might have happened (Nichols, 2010).

In sum, the documentary filmmaking method may be used in EdD programs as an alternative to the traditional dissertation in the form of a distinct track of scholarship. The documentary filmmaking EdD track serves to collect and analyze descriptive research data to illuminate and address social injustices in education, as well as spotlight findings such as directions for social change or systemic improvement. In this regard, documentary filmmaking serves not only as a form of qualitative research, but also as a form of action research that meets important academic research criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020).

Producing a Documentary Film Follows Standard Qualitative Research Methodology

The process of planning a study using documentary film as a mode of research incorporates traditional methods used in qualitative investigations to collect and analyze data (Friend & Caruthers, 2016), namely: 1) site selection – where to film, how to position the camera and microphone, 2) participant selection - whom to film and obtaining consent using a consent form or media release form, 3) data collection - recording audio and video using equipment, designing protocols for interviews and observations during filming, 4) data analysis - reviewing and selecting video and audio clips during editing, 5) findings, discussion, and recommendations - making meaning of the video clips and context by sequencing selected clips, adding other audio visual elements, and finally, 6) sharing results - disseminating the results through the production of a documentary film (Friend & Caruthers, 2016).

Ethical Standards for Video Production

A doctoral documentary film project may be required to seek approval through an Institutional Review Board. Ethical standards in documentary filmmaking in research contexts are crucial for maintaining integrity and respecting participants. Key ethical considerations include:

Informed Consent - Researchers clearly explain the purpose of the video, its intended use in the dissertation, and potential future applications. Participants should be given the opportunity to review footage and withdraw consent if desired to ensure transparency (Miller & Boulton, 2007).

Privacy and Confidentiality - Maintaining participant privacy is critical. Plans to attend to the individual needs of a participant for confidentiality are deeply considered (Kamanzi & Romania, 2019). Techniques such as blurring faces, masking faces, showing just the hands may be used to protect identities when necessary. Researchers must also be sensitive to participants' comfort levels during filming, potentially excluding those who express discomfort even though they might have powerful stories or insights that would be valuable to the study.

Accuracy - Video content must accurately represent the research findings. Footage should be presented factually, without bias, and with transparency regarding any editing or post-production techniques used (Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020).

Cultural Sensitivity - Researchers must be mindful of cultural and social contexts during filming and editing. Including participants' voices in the video can serve to validate interpretations and ensure cultural authenticity (Leung & Hawkins, 2011).

Producing a documentary film requires detailed planning, research, interviewing, editing, and post-production work, all of which demand a high level of rigor, adhering to ethical standards, as well as attention to detail. A finished documentary film can be used to convey the research objectives, methodology, analysis, and conclusions through audio-visual means without any accompanying written documentation.

Authentic Storytelling in Documentary Research Is Critical to Social Transformation

Documentary filmmaking is an effective research method to use in doctoral programs to advocate for social issues (Kemmitt, 2007). Capturing genuine descriptions of lived experiences from individuals experiencing them is essential to tell stories that reveal authentic perspectives and to promote democracy and equity in education. According to Delgado (1989), "Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer

together." (p. 2440). Documentary filmmaking as a research approach provides an opportunity to tell real stories that deconstruct power dynamics between the researcher and the research participants, co-create knowledge, communicate the social context of knowledge shared, and empower participants (Bonny & Berkes, 2008).

Several authors concur that documentary films are a valid means of research to bring critical issues to the forefront in order to inform viewers about changes that need to take place, offering powerful and practical insights that other practitioners in the education field can glean from, and to enhance activism to solve real-world problems (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Friend & Caruthers, 2016; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Trautrims et al., 2012). Recorded evidence integrated in a documentary film can serve to communicate model educational program practices and innovations in the preparation of educators and educational leaders (Friend & Militello, 2015). In addition, documentary films have the potential to be seen by and resonate with a broad audience, including academic researchers, educational decision-makers, and a variety of school stakeholders such as students, parents, school staff, and interested community members to advance social change (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). A documentary film as a form of doctoral research has the potential to affect a wider audience than writing a dissertation alone might be able to. Simultaneously, it also has the potential to clearly spotlight specific systemic or institutional changes that are needed to yield positive educational and social transformation.

Documentary filmmaking as a research method not only has the capacity to expose critical social issues in education but also directs the audience to see an alternate vision for the future to catalyze action. Akbar (2023) stated that as a society "we should revisit our stories about reforms, our commitments to the values, heroes, villains, and traditions that they propagate. We might consider we have much of it wrong and then work with others to get the stories right, and to shift our roles therein" (p. 2577). What better way would there be to tell truthful, accurate stories about issues related to the current educational system and to bring to light authentic voices that directly spotlight a direction for beneficial reform, than through doctoral study involving the production of a well-researched documentary film?

Pioneering Documentary Filmmaking to Address Problems of Practice

An EdD program typically showcases problems of practice and ways to address them, so it lends itself to a broad range of media such as film, mixed media, and other art forms that can have immediate and long-lasting impact. The SJSU EdD Leadership Program pioneered documentary filmmaking as an exploratory qualitative research method option for doctoral researchers to consider. Dr. A. Danzig, the founding director of the program, and Dr. R. Gliner, who joined the program faculty two years after it started, envisioned this pathway to advance organizational change and social activism (R. Gliner, personal communication, March 29, 2025). In their first year, candidates who chose filmmaking as the research method that best suited their area of study selected Gliner as their dissertation chair. Since the program follows a cohort format, all candidates progress through the same course sequence regardless of their research methodology. Doctoral candidates who chose the documentary filmmaking option submitted a written dissertation along with a link to the video file to the graduate school. Our documentaries and those of fellow doctoral candidates are listed below.

Table 1. Documentary Filmmaking as a Dissertation Component at the SJSU EdD Leadership Program

Author/Director and date of completion	Dissertation title	Documentary title and link
Ann, J. (2018).	Bridges and Barriers: The Educational Experience of Homeless Students and Families in Santa Cruz County	Finding Home
Aravamudhan, R. (2019).	Bridging the English Language Divide and Building Self Confidence in Marginalized Communities: An Exploratory Study in Tamil Nadu, India	I Can
Filion, A. (2019).	Experiences of Adolescent Refugee Students Who Attend Afterschool Programs for Literacy Support	Creating Safe Learning Spaces in Turbulent Times
Vargas, S. (2021).	Exploring the Deleterious Connection Between Traditional School Discipline Practices and Male Latino Students Who Have Endured Adverse Childhood Experiences: An Exploratory Study in Northern California	Kicked Out
Jaco, T. (2021).	The Criteria for Developing A TK-12 Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum	Fidelity at the Forefront: The Fight for Ethnic Studies
Nwarfor, G. (2021).	Corporal Punishment in Eastern Nigeria	The Body Listens Better than the Ear
Tran, A. (2021).	Perceptions of the Influence of Cell Phones and Social Media Usage on Students' Academic Performance	
Jaffer, A. (2022).	The Role of School Counselors in Advocating for Social Justice for All Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic	Counseling for Social Justice
Carunungan, G. (2022).	An Exploratory Study on How Math Stories Engage Young Learners in Mathematical Sense-Making	Math Makes Sense with Math Stories
Grasty, K. (2023).	Edible Learning: School Food Service Programming and Experiential Education That Promote Sustainable Agriculture and Better Nutritional Health	Edible Learning: Promoting Better Nutrition in Schools (NETA)
Guzman, A. (2023).	Never Too Young: The Existence, Impact, and Sustainability of Ethnic Studies in Elementary School	Never Too Young: Ethnic Studies in Elementary School
Giles, D. (2024).	Embracing Mindfulness-Based Professional Development in Early Childhood Education	Embracing Mindfulness-Based Professional Development in Early Childhood Education

Documentary Filmmaking Methodology

There are four primary reasons one might choose to produce a documentary film as a key component of doctoral research: first, to give participants the opportunity to speak for themselves on camera sharing their experiences (Kemmitt, 2007). For instance, in one documentary, Dalit communities in India, which are oppressed socially in the village setting and can seldom voice their opinion, were able to have their voices heard (Aravamudhan, 2019a). Second, documentaries can be utilized to bring to the forefront issues of social change in education (Friend & Caruthers, 2016). The visual narrative of the program elements and stakeholder experiences provides opportunities to share new program practices and innovations in the preparation of educators and educational leaders (Friend & Militello, 2015). Third, documentaries reach a wider audience and achieve a larger outreach through social media, internet, and other forums (Friend & Militello, 2015). For example, *Edible Learning: Promoting Better Nutrition in Schools*, (Grasty, 2023a), which has an environmentalist stance, has been broadcast on public television stations across the country. And finally, the documentary serves to use visual images as effective tools in several contexts within the research process. This aspect allows for transparency of the research processes (Weber, 2008) and brings forth a visual narrative of authentic reality.

Documentary filmmaking method involves collecting, analyzing, and sequencing data much like other forms of qualitative research.

Collecting Data. Each of the documentaries in Table 1 used data in the form of videos of interviews, observations, and "b-roll" footage to establish context for the research process and to ground the study in an identified problem of practice. Multiple sources of data such as interviews and observations from stakeholders were collected that substantiated as well as enhanced the credibility of the studies (Theoharis, 2007). A media release form that was approved through the Institutional Review Board was used to obtain permission from all participants to be shown in the documentary film. For participants below the age of 18, permission on the form was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of the children. The time and location of the interviews were decided based on the availability and preference of the participants.

The filming of classroom sessions and interviews was conducted with acknowledgement of the funds of knowledge of the participants; we engaged them as creators of knowledge rather than just as video subjects (Friend & Militello, 2015). As the researcher is responsible for both the analysis and interpretation of data, it was important to include voices of participants in the recordings of events as a way of validating interpretations (Leung and Hawkins, 2011). Research participants for our studies were often given an opportunity to review the video footage after it was taken to ensure that their perceptions and responses had been captured correctly.

Data collection processes also included making additional decisions about the location, lighting, sound, and the background. The camera as a tool that facilitated gathering data provided rich contextual experiences for the interviews and observations. The filming of interviews took place while participants were engaged in an activity at a location of their choice which gave them more agency and control as interviews were done based on the participants' comfort and preference. Allowing participants control over the context of filming also helped mediate our own positionalities as researchers. For instance, one of the participant interviews in a documentary was done at the participant's street side shop (Aravamudhan, 2019a). It was an informal interviewing experience as the interviewee answered questions while engaged in a familiar activity relevant to the focus of the study. In another documentary, school cafeteria workers were comfortable being interviewed while cooking and working in the kitchen, an environment that was familiar to them (Grasty, 2023a).

Analyzing Data. Transitioning from the data collection to the analysis phase involved integrating qualitative analysis with the documentary film editing process. This phase involved exploring and analyzing qualitative data while endeavoring to create a cohesive story in the form of a film. Since we as researchers conducted data analysis and video-editing as a combined process, decisions for which clips to include were based on both aesthetic sensibilities as well as the need to tell an authentic story (Petrarca & Hughes, 2014). The approach to rigorous analysis of data was based on qualitative research theory while using video editing software such as Adobe Premiere Pro or Final Cut ProX as a tool to facilitate the coding, searching, and selecting of data (e.g., interview footage).

The video footage was categorized deductively based on broad areas that the study was aiming to understand, and then each researcher inductively generated categories based on participants' actions and words. Categories or bins based on the meaning that emerged from the video footage were created. The themes for the sub-sequences were determined based on the purpose of the study, through the lens of the theories informing the research and keeping in mind the researcher's bias and positionality (Miles et al., 2014). The series of clips were then reviewed, and the final clips to be included into the master sequence for the documentary were selected by the researcher. The selection was based on which footage conveyed powerful moments in the research process as related to the problem of practice and on the visual appeal depicting the context, including nonverbal behavior. Video-based analysis included visual dimensions such as participant body language, tone, natural speech patterns, and vocal pauses, all of which helped to provide an in-depth and rich analysis.

Sequencing Data. In compiling the master sequence, we had to make difficult decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of clips. Engaging in analytical reflection to ensure integrity of the data was of critical importance. In some instances, the assistance of our dissertation advisor was solicited for clip selection, to ensure objectivity and that each theme was well represented. A master sequence of video clips representing the major themes was generated to produce a first cut of the film. Then b-roll footage was included in the video creation process to supplement the main interview clips to make the storyline cohesive (Friend & Militello, 2015).

Editorial decisions vary. In some of the documentaries in Table 1, voice-overs were used for interviews instead of subtitles to overcome the restriction of the length of lines that can be seen on the screen, to mitigate the estimated reading speed of the viewers, and to reduce distraction due to text. In addition, Knowles and Cole (2008) described the presence of the researcher in arts-informed research as a positive quality. For example, in some instances the scholar decided to appear in the documentary as a narrator to offer the audience a personal view into the research. Scholar narration was used by the authors to bridge different sections in the documentary or to share the scholar's reflections and thoughts. The last step for all of us was to add background music and sounds, title cards, credits, and closed captioning. Through a painstaking process of sequencing interview clips, we discerned tangible themes that are

ultimately reflected in the storyline that each of our films convey. Through the final products, all our documentary films provide a transparent disclosure of data analysis (Milner, 2007).

Evaluation of the Documentary Film as Doctoral Research

Depending on the requirements set forth by the educational institution and the framework of the EdD program, a documentary film project may undergo an Institutional Human Subject Review process as is required of any doctoral research. Two out of the three authors of this paper went through the Institutional Review Board to ensure protection for the participants in our research.

The dissertation committee consisted of a chair, a faculty member from within the program, and a content area expert. Our committees were involved in the broad discussions about the documentary film and offering guidance right from the proposal defense stage. Committee members reviewed the documentary film after the final cut and to ensure that it met the required research standards. A written document consisting of introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and bibliography was also submitted to the committee for review. We each participated in a doctoral defense that included our positionalities, research questions, research methodology, results, reflection, and recommendations. Any concerns by the committee were addressed and revisions made as needed. Juggling the production of both a documentary film and a written document required strict scheduling, firm deadlines, and a careful balance to ensure steady progress on both fronts to meet our graduation timeline.

The Potential of Documentary Films for Broad Outreach

Each of the documentaries identified in Table 1 constituted part of the results chapter of their respective scholar's dissertation. In some cases, the documentary film was the main component of the results chapter as it represented the findings of the research (Jaco, 2021a; Jaco 2021b; Nwafor, 2021a; Nwafor, 2021b; Tran, 2021a; Tran, 2021b; Vargas, 2021a; Vargas, 2021b), and in others they were complementary gestures to the written analysis of the findings which was represented as a complete chapter in addition to the film (Ann, 2018a; Ann, 2018b; Aravamudhan, 2019a; Aravamudhan, 2019b; Carunungan, 2022a; Carunungan, 2022b; Filion, 2019a; Filion, 2019b; Giles, 2024a; Giles, 2024b; Grasty, 2023a; Grasty, 2023b; Guzman, 2023a; Guzman, 2023b; Jaffer, 2022a; Jaffer, 2022b). All the documentary films were designed as stand-alone products, often with distinct, engaging titles different from the dissertation title and were particularly valuable in that they provided viewers access to the research data directly. We believe that the complementary nature of the documentary film as a key component of a dissertation serves to incorporate both creative and scholarly elements and directs the attention of non-academicians toward taking interest in reading the written dissertation.

Many of the doctoral documentaries named in Table 1 have been shared widely within participating schools and relevant organizations. Some of them have aired on public television in several regions of the United States. The broad exposure to the respective subjects has helped to bring needed awareness and impact positive change, such as promoting critical educational programs. For instance, the project showcased in *Edible Learning: Promoting Better Nutrition in Schools* (Grasty, 2023a), garnered attention and was recognized with a 2023 Golden Bell Award by the California School Boards Association for being an exemplary student support services program model (CSBA, 2023). Also, our documentaries as a whole or in shorter clips are being used to train teachers, counselors, and school staff in the United States, India, and Africa. The documentary *Counseling for Social Justice* (Jaffer, 2022a) was separated into eight shorter segments that are 3-12 minutes in length, each with its own subheading. This segmentation has enabled educators to embed segments, all of which are uploaded to YouTube, into lectures and professional development workshops. Entire documentaries have been accepted for showings at special events such as regional, national, and international professional conferences. Similarly, our research findings using the documentary filmmaking method have also been shared in a variety of professional spaces.

In one case, additional technical requirements needed to be completed to have the film accepted by the National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA), a programming service for airing documentary films on public television stations (n.d.). In April 2024, *Edible Learning: Promoting Better Nutrition in Schools* (Grasty, 2023a), began to be shown on public television channels across the country. The film has aired on over 20 public television stations throughout the U.S., including stations in California, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, and Washington, DC. It continues to be released to stations through NETA, allowing it to have broad viewership and potentially strong impact. The documentary film format has allowed doctoral research to gain more visibility due to the dissemination of the documentaries than they would have received as traditional dissertations alone. The participants in the documentary films have been afforded an opportunity to have a far-reaching impact on viewers. Documentary film as a research method frequently highlights best practices in the fields of study and empowers individuals who contributed to the research to share their knowledge and practices with a wider audience than they otherwise would have.

Limitations to Producing a Documentary Film as a Dissertation Component

Documentary filmmaking as research, although sanctioned by SJSU and touted as one of the highlights of the EdD Leadership Program, was still a divergent form and selected by only 12 doctoral candidates between 2018-2024 from a pool of approximately 107 candidates. Gliner served as the dissertation advisor for all those who chose documentary filmmaking as a key component of their dissertation; therefore, there was a limit to the number of students who could embark on this journey. Although the authors were well supported and satisfied with their choice of using documentary filmmaking as their research method, they did have to contend with some challenges specific to this form, including their own limited knowledge with the medium at the start of the process.

Documentary film research candidates are generally not professional filmmakers and therefore have limited film recording and editing proficiency. Gliner provided basic instructions for setting up shots and making recordings, and in some cases, he attended the first interview to ensure that the camera was positioned and recording correctly. An interdisciplinary approach might be useful to students who do not have a documentary expert advisor in their department and need that extra support to create documentaries. In such cases, we recommend inviting faculty members from the film

department to offer workshops and classes, inviting a documentary filmmaker to be part of the dissertation committee, and/or utilize training sessions in documentary filmmaking offered by the educational institution, LinkedIn, Youtube, and other sources.

At times, students using different kinds of quantitative and qualitative software or other tools to analyze data require training and support, and this training is similar to the help and support needed to use video editing software. Some of us were able to procure outside help with editing by contracting a film studies student or professional film editor, but since that type of added support is not always the case, it is important to know that this research process involves learning how to use appropriate software applications and gaining technical skills in film editing. We contend that students in this current generation watch and make more videos than in previous generations and have increased access to editing software on their devices; this trend is expected to continue, particularly as usage of YouTube, Vimeo, and other such platforms increases.

Increased costs may be incurred by the doctoral candidate making a documentary, for instance, needing a higher level of computer memory capacity, updated software, recording equipment, tripod, microphones and in the case of Tran (2021a), even a cinematography drone. Learning how to use filming and editing equipment takes practice and time. Therefore, those of us who chose to make a documentary film made extra investments in the form of time and funds. Fortunately, our EdD program invested in two professional camcorders and microphones that were available to the documentary filmmakers and that we took turns using. High quality phone cameras with advanced lens technology have ameliorated this issue to some degree as they can be used to capture professional-level video footage.

The EdD program at SJSU recently discontinued supporting the documentary filmmaking option to accompany dissertations. The program has lost what we see as a signature pedagogy that served to attract students to the university in hopes of conducting this alternative type of qualitative research. Though the documentary program was successful and still in demand, a staffing change resulted in the program no longer having access to its resident expert. The elimination of this unique pathway limits opportunities for doctoral students to engage in creative and alternative modes of research. The loss of the documentary filmmaking option in an EdD program that highlights social justice brings up questions about program culture and program identity.

Recommendations

The authors believe that EdD programs will continue to attract a wider range of students, tackle the most pertinent problems of practice, and address issues of social importance more effectively if they incorporate an opportunity to pursue non-traditional research methods as a distinct track or as a creative component complementary to a dissertation. It is of critical importance that alternative forms of doctoral research are supported and valued by EdD program faculty and directors, graduate studies administrators, and leaders of the institution at the highest levels. High standards of rigor in doctoral programs can be maintained, not even though, but *because* alternative research options such as documentary filmmaking are made available to doctoral students. A shift from holding onto archaic principles in the name of tradition to expanding the use of non-traditional methods that disrupt exclusionary practices is in order. Core principles that advance social issues must constitute the foundation of EdD programs to protect the work and progress being made in broadening dissertation formats.

It would serve EdD programs well to strive to find faculty members across disciplines, in areas such as broadcast journalism or film studies, who might be willing to be advisors or at least committee members for the doctoral student wishing to conduct documentary research. Perhaps funding mechanisms within the university could be planned for and established in advance to allow advisors across disciplines to assist students wishing to engage in this type of qualitative research that has great potential for broad social impact. Universities might include in department budgets a fund that supports annual contracts to hire professional filmmakers who can offer services to support students interested in conducting documentary research. EdD programs are encouraged to reflect upon how to promote and sustain the continual evolution of their own departmental and interdepartmental organizational structures. This process includes collaborating across departments and planning for specific budget allocations, to be able to partner with individuals with expertise to support doctoral students. In this way, doctoral students can be provided with a greater array of research methods to choose from, resulting in the evolution of the EdD to match modern-day communication forms and be more socially impactful.

Conclusion

This article highlights how a rigorous, technical, intellectual, and artistic process such as documentary filmmaking deserves to be recognized as a valuable qualitative research method. We present our collective, shared experiences as three doctoral researchers in education who graduated within the past five years and who had the same advisor who supported us in our efforts to conduct qualitative research using documentary filmmaking to elucidate educational problems of practice in need of being addressed.

With the growing use of devices that enable video recording, documentary filmmaking has become a useful method in qualitative research in the humanities. Filmmaking as a form of inquiry engages the audience and supports dissemination of knowledge in broader, more compelling ways than what is possible with traditional dissertations targeted for academics. As Petrarca and Hughes (2014) pointed out, the audience should not be restricted to the academic community; therefore, universities must augment research options so that complexities that are often difficult to derive from text can be more easily discerned by a broader audience.

Our respective documentaries (Aravamudhan, 2019a; Grasty, 2023a; Jaffer, 2022a) helped us realize how powerful films can be in ensuring that participant voices are heard and in allowing the viewer to make meaning of what is being presented. The documentary filmmaking process enhanced our research capabilities as we built on existing qualitative processes for data collection and analysis, using creativity in developing our own approaches to film production. We realized that while traditional qualitative research approaches for data collection and analysis are important, we had to rethink the process of dissemination of our research since the intended audience for our dissertation included practitioners, educators, and laypersons, in addition to academics. Documentary filmmaking as a form of scholarship has great potential for broad viewership and, most importantly, can serve to galvanize support for social change to address identified problems of practice in education.

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