

**A Place Out of Time  
The Bordentown School**

**Lesson Plan 9: Deconstructing the Documentary**

<b>Lesson Title:</b> Deconstructing the Documentary Film
<b>Lesson Summary:</b> What happens when we watch a documentary? How does what we see and hear affect us and contribute to our overall understanding of a topic? Like any documentary, <i>A Place Out of Time- The Bordentown School</i> is a constructed narrative. Using interviews, outside resources (photos, film clips, headlines, music) and third-person narration, it tells a story of African-American history. But what perspective is evident? What choices were made? What was left out? How does the use of specific resources in the film affect the story line?  This lesson will ask students to analyze the film, to differentiate between narrative (fiction) and documentary storytelling, and to consider the ways in which all films are constructed by filmmaking decisions. They will ultimately consider the ways in which the final product (this documentary film) might or might not reflect the complete “reality” of the topic it presents.
<b>Timeframe:</b> 5-6 periods (45 minute periods)
<b>Learning Targets (Standards)</b>  NCSS: Standard II: Time, Continuity, and Change  NJCSS: <b>Standard 9.1 21st Century Life Skills:</b> All students will demonstrate creative, critical thinking, collaboration and problem solving skills needed to function successfully as both global citizens and workers in diverse ethnic and organizational cultures. <b>Related Content Statements for Standard 6.3</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Active citizens in the 21st century:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Determine the credibility and value of information, while also considering context, point of view, and multiple perspectives.</li><li>• Analyze sources of prejudice and discrimination and propose solutions to eliminate them.</li><li>• Collaboratively evaluate possible solutions to problems and conflicts that arise in an interconnected world.</li><li>• Critically analyze information, make ethical judgments, and responsibly address controversial issues.</li><li>• Communicate through rational and persuasive written and oral arguments to present solutions to controversial issues.</li></ul></li></ul> <b>Related Content Statement for Standard 9.1.E</b> Digital media are 21st century tools used for local and global communication of ideas and events.

<p><b>Essential Questions:</b>          What is the purpose of a documentary film?</p> <p>What differentiates a documentary film from other film types?</p> <p>What does it mean to present reality visually?</p> <p>Does a director have an ethical responsibility when making a documentary film? If so, what might that be?</p>	<p><b>Enduring Understandings:</b>          Films (both narrative/fiction and documentary) are purposely constructed.</p> <p>Bias is possible in all constructed stories.</p> <p>The various editorial and visual decisions required in making a documentary create the drama and overall tone and or story line of that documentary.</p> <p>Even films based on factual information require viewers who are critical thinkers and who consider the many facets of filmmaking that constructed the final product.</p>	
<p><b>Materials Needed:</b> Viewing copy of the film <i>A Place Out of Time</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whiteboard or equivalent</li> <li>- Internet access to on-line documentary clips and photo archives (DVD player may also be used to show a variety of clips)</li> <li>- Lisa Delpit’s article <i>Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing Before the Master?</i></li> </ul>		
<p><b>Goals/Objectives</b></p>	<p><b>Learning Activities/Instructional Strategies</b></p>	<p><b>Formative Assessments</b></p>
<p>Students will break down the components of filmmaking to consider the division between reality and constructed reality.</p> <p>Students will build critical awareness of the process involved in making a film: how the decisions made in a film’s construction might affect the final outcome and final message the audience takes away.</p>	<p>1) <i>Mapping the Meaning</i>          What does the word documentary mean to students?          (Gauging students’ prior knowledge)</p> <p>2) <i>Decoding Sections for Impact and Message</i>          (Section by section close analysis of the complete film)</p> <p>3) <i>Revisiting Sources &amp; Constructing Realities</i>          (Using archival materials from Bordentown School to create a student version of the story – What decisions are made? And what is the responsibility of telling someone else’s story?)</p>	<p>Personal responses (possible screening chart) in notebooks (which can be collected).</p> <p>Class discussions and partner sharing during section-by-section analysis of the film.</p> <p>Student exploration of story lines and the scripting their own “version” of the story using additional research, writing and photos</p>
<p><b>DAY 1</b>  <b>Mapping the Meaning:</b>          The first day of this lesson should allow the teacher to assess students’ prior knowledge. What do they know about documentaries? Have they</p>		

seen documentaries? Which ones and where? What have they retained from viewing these films?

How do students define the documentary film as a genre? Begin by doing a mapping diagram on the board with students offering their descriptions. (might get words like “reality” “truth” “black and white” “history”) The teacher might then ask students to define a fiction film. What words are associated with that genre? How do these two compare?

What elements do documentary films use to tell a story? (Students should become familiar with the elements used available to construct a documentary.)

- Footage (both present day and past)
- Photos (both present day and past)
- Music (both from setting and added to setting)
- Sound-bites (from interviews with subjects and experts)
- Narration (third person from a narrator, or first person from a subject)
- Graphics (maps, animations, titles)

Which documentaries have won awards and are well known for excellence in our society? Teachers might show a sampling of clips of documentaries which are suitable for the classroom. Some to consider which have won nation-wide attention:

*Sicko, Bowling for Columbine, Fast Food Nation, Born into Brothels, The Cove*

Or the teacher might choose to use lesser known films: (made by students and with powerful messages)

*Aqua Finito, Lessons From a Tailor, I'm Just Anneke* (see links below)

<http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/10/aquafinito>

[http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/10/lessons\\_from\\_a\\_tailor](http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/10/lessons_from_a_tailor)

[http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/10/im\\_just\\_anneke](http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/10/im_just_anneke)

After showing the documentary clips, teachers should have students write down students' response to the film. Even though the students may have seen only a portion of a film, what was the message of that film? What made them believe that this was the message? What “clues” did they find? As a class, share those responses and ask students which films would they like to see more of and why? What draws our interest to a documentary film?

When considering the message of each film, do students consider who was making the film? Might that have any bearing? Might the director be sharing a point of view? (In Michael Moore films, this tends to be pretty clear.) Do the students find a point of view surprising in a documentary film?

Do students consider the editing of the film – the ways in which images were put next to one another? Did they consider the music of the film? And how the music made them feel?

Have students revisit the words written on the board at the beginning of class. Do they still ring true?

What changes might need to be made. (The teacher should keep this list in order to refer to it after other related activities.)

If there is time, it could be beneficial to end class with a short video from the Media That Matters Festival. It's called *(Hate) Machine*. The director created the film (which completely twists children's scripted words to create new sentences) as a response to "the concept of media truth" and an opportunity to "provoke a closer inspection of the words and images that we rely on to interpret our world." It is 4:45 in length. Here is the link: [http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films/hate\\_machine](http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films/hate_machine)

The showing of this film, however, **MUST** be followed with the explanation that this film was constructed to elicit a response. The director's intent was to show what is possible in the video editing of a story, but this type of re-editing the truth (and the words spoken by individuals) is **NOT** the popular practice or mandate of documentary filmmakers in any way. The clip is being used only to show how powerful the remixing of words and images can be, and how critical thinking is necessary when considering any form of constructed "reality" -- documentary or otherwise.

#### **DAY 2 – 4 Decoding Sections for Impact and Message**

In order to fully examine the documentary *A Place Out of Time*, students must be familiar with the entire documentary. Quite simply, they cannot be asked to scrutinize sections and deconstruct overall meaning without putting those sections into the context of the complete film. The film is :57 minutes in length so complete viewing will not fit into one class period. The suggestion is to have students watch almost all of the film in one sitting of **DAY 2**, and save the final 15 minutes for **DAY 3**. It is critical, however, that while watching the film, students are taking notes and compiling their personal responses to the film. They should write down the moments that stand out to them, and any sound-bites (words from the film's subjects – or interviewees) that they find particularly interesting or moving or significant to the story should also be noted. They should pay attention to any music and note when that music is used, and how that music affects the storyline (or does it?) Students can create a chart in their notebooks, or the teacher may hand out a chart to help organize this note-taking process, if so desired.

On **DAY 3-4**, after the film has been completely screened, the teacher can guide a discussion of the various sections of the film. First consider the film as a whole. What's the students' emotional response to the film? What do they think the director wants them to "take away"? Is there a **MORAL**?

Then, in pairs, ask students to review their notes. What were the moments that stood out the most to them? Is there a consensus among pairs? As a class, write those "key moments" on the board. What were the moments of the most consensus among students? (the teacher can take part in this too – what appealed to him/her?) What was it about those moments that affected so many at once? Next, consider the film's construction. How do you think it was outlined? (back and forth between history – how the school began and how it evolved, and the personal stories of the students who attended interwoven throughout) What kind of images did you see in the film? (both black and white and color – in a constructed back and forth between the two) What was the message of the beginning, the middle and the end of the film? Was there a turning point? Where? All responses should be written on the board for consideration.

Now, go back to the film and watch specific sections together: The goal is to examine the words and images from various scenes and determine the effect and its role in the overall message of the film.

## EXAMINING THE SPECIFICS – SUGGESTIONS:

### THE BEGINNING.

Timecode 00:00 to 01:52

Consider the opening sequence – What do we know right away? What is the tone of the film? How does the music add to the tone? (The teacher can also play another music and show some of the opening sequence. Even though the sound bites will no longer be heard, students may still note the difference music makes. What changes?)

Why does the film use black and white newsreel clips? (This might open up a discussion of old newsreels and what they were. How did they deliver the news? Were they truthful? Promotional? Is anything being promoted here? What scene is set from the very beginning? What does the narrator say the story will be about? (“The rise and fall of the Bordentown School is the story of race and education in America that touches three centuries.”)

02:41 – 03:36 We hear voices and meet the people who seem to know the school. What do we learn? How does this shape our impression of the film and what we will be learning?

(Bordentown is a special place, a unique experience that was known then by those lucky to attend?)

03:36 - 04:47 Narrator says very specific things – using very specific language. How would you describe the words used? (The narrator says - “a unique educational utopia” “ an incubator for Black intellect that also taught values, discipline and life skills to Black children”)

We also hear from our first “expert” – Clement Alexander Price. What is the purpose of an “expert” in this film do you think? What are his credentials? Do his credentials change the way we feel about his words? Does his message add to the narrator’s message? In what way? What might be the purpose of his sound bite being used here? (these are not small, general words he is using – instead words like “the most significant thing” leave little gray area in the point of the message.)

What are we seeing during this section? How does that add to our understanding of the message of the film so far?

Price ends by saying these students would be ready for the Civil Rights movement. What do you think he means there? Were they literally preparing for a civil rights protest?

### SPECIFIC VISUALS:

(Be sure to first ask students to share what shots they wrote down in their notebooks when they were watching the film.)

Some shots to note- 01:52 Walking shot to walking shot – consider the construction. Is this appealing? Salute shot to salute shot. What is the significance of this blending of old and new? What do we see then the older man in saluting? See where else in the film this old footage/new footage technique is used. (we will see again at approx. 28:00)

08:00 08:24 – What are we seeing here? Why is this photo used at 08:04? (lynching) Do you agree with its use?

09:59 -14:01 We meet the participants – the people who attended this school. Why is this important? How is this section constructed? What do we see? What kinds of stories do they share? What effect does seeing participants with their memorabilia have on the viewer? Is this a side note to fill time or is there intent? Why might the director have placed this section together in this point in the film? (setting up for the reunion)

idea)

14:28 – 14:51 We hear from the President of the Social Club - “Bordentown taught me how to handle the world. Getting the end product as you so chose to have it. That’s what life all about. That’s Bordentown training.”

What does he mean? Does this sound-bite help to set the scene for any future information in the film?

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION: What was the effect of having students in a boarding school environment and sequestered from homes? Was it important to providing opportunity for these students? In what way? How might the pressures from home and home neighborhoods keep kids from achieving? Do you think a boarding school like this would ever work today?

### THE MIDDLE

18:36 – 19:47 Tour of the property today with former student – run down building shots inter-cut with stories of what the school once was.

Consider especially the shot at 0:19:27 (pan down of building to padlock and Danger: asbestos sign– “This was the chapel..”)

What feeling do you get from the image? How does the image affect the story the man is telling? Why do you think this might have been edited this way?

Consider the shot at 19:40 too – of him talking about having to sit erect, and then sitting erect. Holding it. We see it both close-up and from a distance. What is the message? Was this shot created for our benefit? Does that change the message in any way?

We learn about the Gregory years at the school.

21:55 – 22:02 Consider the use of newspaper articles. How is this effect constructed? What is the possible reason for doing that? And what is the effect? This montage ends with an infamous lynching scene. 22:02

Why is this shot included? What do students know about this scene? Does the director assume any prior knowledge of this famous photo?

What is your reaction to this shot? (Do you think that reaction is intended?)

25:04 – 28:13 - Back to Reunion Day

Note the shot at 25:20 (a man’s license plate) Why is that shot included? What is the significance? Consider the other shots – people preparing for the Reunion. What is happening here? And why is it being shown? What message is it sending? (Is it about the tasks they are doing or rather all setting a tone? (They appear to still take pride in the place – doing it together – wanting it to be nice)

28:13 Here is the use of a color to black and white walking scene again. Effective?

29:50 Graduate showing his uniform. What do you take from this scene?

32:25 – 34:31 Old footage of students doing the work to maintain the building.

DISCUSSION: What do you think about this footage in this section? What is the message of the stories? What are you seeing as you hear the stories? (Would the personal stories have been as effective without the footage?) Can you imagine having to take care of your school in this way? Would it be good? Or bad? The students seem to have liked this participation. Are you surprised? Why do you think they might have

liked it? What was to be gained?

### THE END

49:00 – 50:00 Consider the delivery of the narrator. Is there a message in her delivery?  
What is the purpose of the music?

51:37 – 52:31 consider the graphics and the music  
(why is the scene of the reunion in this section as well? What are you seeing that might add to the drama?)

### *Final thoughts:*

53:00- 54:51

What is the mood here. What is the message? It ends with a sound bite not narration and with graphics with information rather than a picture.  
How might that affect the story?

54:52 – 56:33 the mood changes. How? And Why? What do we learn in this last bit?  
(Viewers get the last details, see former students speaking with people in the home today, hear the school song, learn that former students have built a memorial of sorts just in case the school is torn down – we get lots of information in a very short amount of time. Why? Does this feel right?)

Consider the very last three shots in particular? Why might these have been chosen? Does it add the general mood of this ending montage?  
Why do you think the director decided to end on this note?

DISCUSSION: How does the ending of the film fit with the overall mood and purpose of the film?

Consider the bites we just heard.

53:00 “They didn’t realize what an important school it was till after it was closed. They talk about discrimination set us back. When you kill the institution of learning you also set us back.”

52:19 “Think of the hundreds of black that would have made contributions to society that we have made had that school still been open.”  
Do you think this is true? Should the school have remained open? Would a school like that serve a positive purpose today? Do you think there is part of this story that has been left out? Might there be people who did not like their experience at the school? How would you find that out?

For Homework and /or additional class discussion, students might read Lisa Delpit’s article *Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing Before the Master*” and consider if there were any benefits to the past ideals of helping African Americans learn the “ways” of the Whites in power.  
How does this story relate to what Delpit is saying? How does Delpit’s line of thinking apply to our world today? Or does it?

### **DAY 5-6 Revisiting Sources, Analyzing Intent and Constructing A “Reality”**

Playing off of the discussions that have taken place in class as the film was reviewed, this is an opportunity for students to “play director,” to make important construction decisions and to further consider the issues that the film presents. What ‘take’ would they have if it were their

film?

By looking at archive photo sites on line (see links below), and searching for articles about the Bordentown School online, they are going to construct a storyboard/script (or game-plan) for a short film. What will be the point of their film? What was the Bordentown experience like in their estimation? How would they effectively show that? (And how much are they influenced by the film they have already seen – prior knowledge?) Are they able to create a story without taking a position? Can their stories be just facts without some directorial intent?

Students should also consider whether or not there is more to the story of Bordentown than what we saw in the documentary? What other articles might they be able to find on-line and will they agree with the themes of A Place Out of Time?

See the attached storyboard/script template for students to use to outline their version of a documentary. On the left side, students will put down all the visual material that would be in their piece. On the right side, they will write their narration lines. If they find quotes about the school in the articles they have chosen for research, they can add those as sound bites in their script on the right side as well.

Students need to think about how the words they are writing works or doesn't work the images they are showing. There has to be a relationship between the two. What music might they use in their piece? What mood are they creating with that choice? Who would be their narrator if they could pick anyone? And why would they want that person to narrate? What "voice" would the narrator lend to the story?

They need to consider the order of the photos they are using. Is there a natural progression in their material? Is the material organized to best tell the story – to best make a point?

The teacher should try and model a sample approach for the students. See the template for a brief example.

(Note – if students have sufficient technological access and interest, they could create an Imovie or an Animoto version of their short film.)

Links for photo archive resources:

<http://www.state.nj.us/state/darm/links/guides/sedma005.html>

[http://www.njwomenshistory.org/Period\\_5/IndustrialSchool.htm](http://www.njwomenshistory.org/Period_5/IndustrialSchool.htm)

[http://www.njstatelib.org/NJ\\_Information/Digital\\_Collections/Digidox9.php](http://www.njstatelib.org/NJ_Information/Digital_Collections/Digidox9.php)

After the students have completed the storyboards/scripts (or even Imovies and Animotos) they should present their ideas to one another.

How have their ideas been similar and how have they been different? Did they choose the same visual material to use?

How did having seen the film affect their approach to making this film? What did it feel like to have the responsibility of telling someone else's story?

**FINAL LESSON WRAP UP** – The final class should take a look at the words that were written on the board on DAY ONE of this lesson. Those words were the students’ initial thoughts about the documentary format. Would they use the same words now? If not, what words might they use instead?

How would they describe the director’s role in creating a documentary?

Would they want to make documentary films in the future themselves?

If so, why?