Lesson: Reality Media?

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will use clips from *56 Up*—the latest installment in one of the world’s most famous documentary film series—to examine the differences between “reality” television and documentaries. The lesson will also provide an opportunity to engage in group discussion, read an informational text, write an opinion piece and practice source citation.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Be able to explain the differences between a reality television program and a documentary.
- Know how to cite an online source properly.
- Read a text that contains both information and opinion.
- Write an opinion-based or informational essay.

GRADE LEVELS
9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
English/Language Arts
Media Literacy

MATERIALS
- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
- Internet access for student research (optional)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute class period, plus time for writing assignment to be completed outside of class

FILM CLIPS

Neil (3:16 min.)
The clip begins at 25:39 with Neil at age 21 talking about his strength and weakness. It ends at 28:55 with him saying, “Lifetime jail sentence.”
Peter (1:26 min.)
The clip begins at 39:18 with the filmmaker’s voiceover explaining that after 28 Up had been released, Peter chose not to continue participating. It ends at 40:44 with Peter explaining that he returned to the project to publicize his band.

Nick and Suzy (1:02 min.)
The clip begins at 1:17:04 with the filmmaker asking Suzy and Nick, “What do you think about making this program?” It ends at 1:18:06 with Nick saying, “That’s all there is to me.”

John and Andrew (2:22 min.)
The clip begins 2:02:50 with John as a boy saying, “I think it’s not a bad idea to pay for schools.” It ends at 2:05:12 with Andrew saying, “I’m always surprised that you appear for five or 10 minutes and everyone remembers your face, but apparently they do.”

**ACTIVITY**

1. Start with a class discussion to prepare students for the writing exercise. Ask students to name “reality” television shows. Once the class has developed a short list, ask students to describe what the shows have in common. In other words, what characteristics make a show “reality” television?
   
   Once there is consensus about the characteristics of reality television shows, repeat the process, but look at documentaries. If students have trouble naming a documentary, you might ask them to think about widely viewed television shows, such as Nature, ESPN’s 30 for 30 or American Experience. Wrap up the discussion by comparing and contrasting the two lists generated by the class, checking that students understand the major distinctions between a documentary and a reality television show.

2. Then pose this question: Would you want to be filmed for a reality television show or documentary? Give students about 15 seconds to think about their answers, and then tell them that before they discuss their answers, they’re going to hear from some people who were featured in one of the most famous documentary film series ever, the Up series. Briefly describe the Up series, which filmed the same people every seven years from 1964, when they were seven years old, until the present.

3. Show each of the clips from 56 Up, pausing for a two-minute free write between each for students to jot down their reactions.

4. As time allows, discuss the pros and cons of participating in a reality show or documentary. Did the clips alter their initial thoughts in any way?

5. As an assessment, allow students to choose from one of two written assignments:
   
   A) Write a position paper explaining why you would or would not want to be in a reality show.
Students who choose this assignment are required to read an essay by Jennifer L. Pozner: “The Surreal World: Class Anxiety, Hyperconsumption and Mocking the Poor, for Your Viewing Pleasure,” from *In These Times*, November 2010 (available at: www.realitybitesbackbook.com/articles-and-essays/).

B) Write an informational essay explaining the difference between a documentary and a reality show.

Students who choose this assignment are required to read an article by Henrik Juel: “Defining Documentary Film” (available at: http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_22/section_1/artc1A.html). If the reading level of this article is too advanced for your class, you may assign WordIQ’s definition of a documentary as an alternative (www.wordiq.com/definition/Documentary_film).

Require each student to incorporate a quote from the assigned article in his or her own piece. If needed, review proper citation format.

EXTENSIONS

1. Have students watch the entire film and discuss the relationship between socioeconomic status and identity. Is being part of a particular socioeconomic class just a matter of how much money one has, or is there also a cultural dimension? You could also introduce students to POV’s Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films (www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php) and then use those to analyze the film.

2. Offer students an opportunity to shoot home movies that they can save and look at seven years from now. Ask them to reflect on how their ideas have changed over the past seven years. What do they predict life will be like seven years from now?

3. Have each student choose one of the people featured in *56 Up* and, after viewing all the segments in which that person appears, write a character sketch.

4. Write and record a review of *56 Up*.

RESOURCES

Documentary Films 101
Jennifer Merin explains the basics of documentary film in this About.com entry.

POV: Behind the Lens Lesson Plans
www.pbs.org/pov/behindthelens/lesson_plan.php#.UbJiCJzm2So
These lesson plans cover the definition of a documentary and using documentaries to explore social issues.

Reality Bites Back
Jennifer L. Pozner is an expert on reality television, and her website offers a range of resources useful for analyzing these types of shows.

**STANDARDS**

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

**SL.9-10.1, 11-12.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**SL.9-10.2** Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL. 11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

**W.9-10.1, 11-12.1** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**W.9-10.2, 11-12.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

**W.9-10.4, 11-12.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

**Content Knowledge:** (http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Language Arts, Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin, 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 150 independent films.