

Guide on Ethnographic Documentary-Making in Youth Work



Rural Youth Cinema



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About the project

The **Rural Youth Cinema** project aims to shed light on rural youth organizations and their work throughout Europe. This specific context for youth work often goes unnoticed and is sometimes even marginalized within society. We believe that the various activities of youth work in rural areas deserve more attention and recognition.

Many youngsters perceive a rural context as offering fewer opportunities. With the Rural Youth Cinema project, we try to change this negative perception, prevalent among the young people in our own organizations, by highlighting and documenting various activities and art projects taking place in rural areas.

Rural Youth Cinema project is developing a qualitative methodology to guide young people in creating ethnographic documentaries. The focus is on youth activities centered around ecological and sustainability themes, which are particularly urgent in the rural contexts where the youth work organizations operate.



Introduction

Rural Youth Cinema: Guide to Ethnographic Documentary Making as a Youth Work Practice is a resource designed to empower young people and organisations working in rural areas in creating ethnographic documentaries to support youth participation and social change. This guide is an important tool for highlighting the significant yet often overlooked contributions of rural youth organizations throughout Europe.

The resource is a collaborative effort of the partnership for **Erasmus K2 project** “Rural Youth Cinema” involving organizations from rural Romania - “Curba de Cultură” and rural Ireland - “Limerick Youth Service” as well as the local theatre house in Belgium - “Mals Vlees”, which brings expertise in art and education. The “University College Leuven-Limburg (UCLL)” contributes its expertise in the educational elements of audio-visual ethnographic filmmaking. Additionally, the “European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC)” plays an important role in amplifying and advocating for the key findings at the European level, ensuring that the voices and stories captured through this project reach a wider audience.

Focusing on ecology and sustainability themes, this guide aligns with urgent global priorities while reflecting the unique challenges and strengths of rural youth work. It provides a step-by-step methodology for producing high-quality ethnographic documentaries, enabling young people to share their experiences and perspectives on these topics.

“Documentary-making allows young people to highlight their rural communities and explore their ethnographic environment”

Project partner



Objectives of the guide

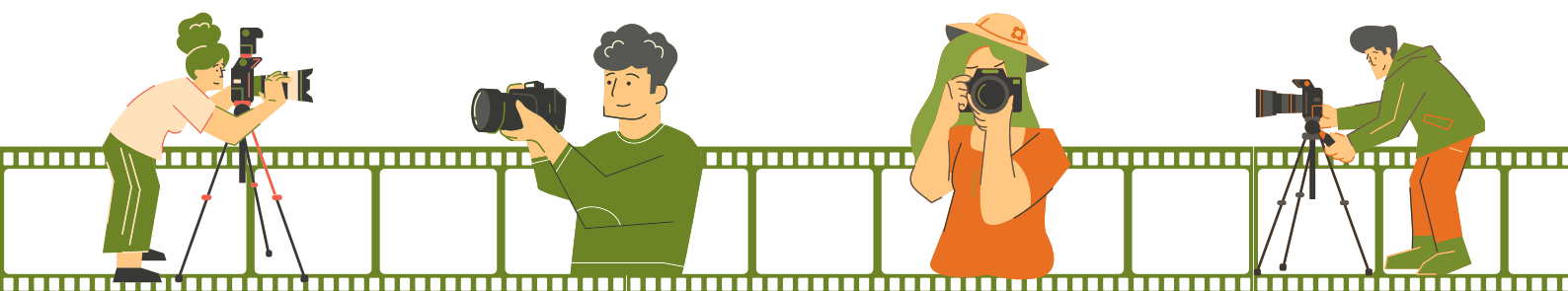
The **Rural Youth Cinema Guide** aims to achieve the following key objectives:

- ▶ Equip young people and organizations in rural areas with the skills and knowledge to create ethnographic documentaries, enabling them to document and share their unique experiences and perspectives;
- ▶ Promote audio-visual, including ethnographic documentary techniques as a methodology in youth work;
- ▶ Use ethnographic documentaries as a tool to drive social change by raising awareness of critical issues related to ecology and sustainability, and advocating for the voices of rural youth at a broader European level;



"Rural for me is defined by the way people are. In rural areas people tend to be more roughened up, more stoic, while in the city people take better care of themselves. That's why I think projects like this are important for young people in rural areas, to be in touch with themselves".

Participant in the event



Understanding the methodology as a youth work practice

What is meant by audio-visual and ethnographic documentary-making?

Audio-visual documentary making is all about creating films or short videos that use both video and sound to tell real stories. This means filming people, places, and events, recording conversations and natural sounds, and then editing everything together to make a compelling and interesting story.

Ethnographic documentary-making takes it a step further by focusing on the detailed study of different cultures and communities, capturing the everyday life of people. It involves immersing yourself in the community, participating in daily activities, and gathering personal stories to show what life is really like for the people being filmed.

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Ethnographic film is the use of film in ethnographic representation as either a method, a record, or a means of reporting on anthropological fieldwork. Like documentary films, ethnographic films are nonfiction films in which live-action shots are edited and shaped into a central narrative drama. While the line between documentary and ethnographic film is blurry, ethnographic film [...] tends to focus explicitly on depictions of sociocultural processes.

Visual Anthropology and Ethnographic Film
Socialsci.libretexts.org

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This approach helps to highlight cultural practices and social dynamics in a respectful and authentic way, giving viewers a deeper understanding of the community's way of life.

"Documentary filmmaking is a way to work with the reality that surrounds us – it's a way to reflect upon this reality and share our thoughts and experiences with others."

KULTUROPA



The Value of Art Education in Youth Work

Arts education in youth work is invaluable not just for its direct benefits to young individuals' development, but also for its **broader contributions to society**. It nurtures essential life skills, fosters emotional and social well-being, and supports cultural and economic vitality.

Using the domain of the arts, youngsters have the chance to interact with the world they will inherit, providing agency and self-awareness at a young age. It may introduce young people to different cultures and perspectives, promoting diversity and inclusion and it provides a safe space for young people to express their emotions and thoughts, which can be particularly beneficial for those who might struggle with verbal communication. Furthermore, engaging in the arts encourages young people to think critically and solve problems creatively. Activities like painting, drama, and music require planning, innovation, and the ability to think outside the box.

Arts education is the domain of **imagination, perception, and reflection**. The arts speak to our ability to imagine a new world. With arts education, an attitude of susceptibility can be fostered with the language of beauty, enchantment, and awe, which are the underpinning of a caring relationship to the world. The arts have, furthermore, an inherent democratic power and a strong historical relationship with active engagement for a better world. Finally, arts education also has the potential to raise awareness and provide the necessary knowledge and skills concerning these issues in the way activities are designed and carried out (materials one works with, possibility of fostering real, lived connections with the nearby world).



**"Documentary filmmaking is a practical
method of capturing our work.**

**It's fun and interactive. It creates memories
for young people."**

Project Partner



Ethnographic documentary-making methodology as a youth work practice – why does it matter?

Even though the use and value of other ethnographic methods in arts education and youth work (such as **ethno-fictional writing** or using **drawing** as an ethnographic method) have been well established in academic literature, ethnographic video documentary has received relatively little attention so far. After all, it has only been in recent years that video-making has become so accessible and widely available, especially to younger populations. With smartphone cameras getting increasingly more advanced each year, and video platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok still on the rise, many youngsters have already been in contact with video content, both as consumers and creators. While in previous years, documentary-making was not a financially feasible medium to work with in most youth clubs, nowadays the youngsters themselves already become fully equipped.

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"Filmmaking is fun but also requires critical thinking. It's a win-win in youth work."

Project Partner

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As with ethnographic or ethno-fictive writing, ethnographic documentary-making has the ability not just to **give a voice** to the author/documentary makers, but to give prominence to this voice (or voices) within the local environment. The makers (i.e. the youngsters) are on camera themselves, as they are moving and interacting in their community. As such, documentary-making is not just a creative practice, but one that visualizes the relations between the artistic medium itself (video documentary) and the context, environment, and day-to-day work in which it takes place.

Like photography, videography has a certain directness as one only has to press 'record', and content creation has started. As such, it can be a more adaptive artistic form, requiring less planning and instead allowing for reacting to more ephemeral elements (i.e., whatever happens to be taking place in front of the camera). Yet, with the focus on ethnography, the makers are also forced to consider their own position, their agency and their relation to the subjects they are documenting. From an arts educative perspective, this combination can be very interesting, as the medium is both outward-looking and introspective, both creative and reflective. What is more, we believe that through this documentary practice, issues that otherwise remain invisible can be revealed. Finally, there is great value in the collaborative aspect of making a documentary together: giving agency to the youngsters as groups with mixed roles.

The process of ethnographic documentary making

In this chapter, we will guide you through the process of ethnographic documentary-making, divided into three key phases:

- ▶ planning and pre-production;
- ▶ filming and production;
- ▶ and the post-production process;

Each phase plays an important role in crafting compelling documentaries that capture the essence of local life, communities, cultures, and human experiences. However, this is not a universal recipe, each context requires an individual approach tailored to the unique characteristics and dynamics of the community and the youth involved.

Firstly, we will explore the importance of planning and researching objectives and themes before diving into filming. This phase includes Identifying the objectives and themes based on ethnographic research techniques; Crafting a narrative and storytelling techniques; Technical and logistical aspect of the preparations; and Possible Challenges and solutions.

Afterwards, filming process will be discussed by touching upon shooting techniques, audio-visual methodologies, possible on-spot challenges and solutions; and collaborative filmmaking within youth groups.

Finally, exploring the creative process of editing and refining the gathered footage in the post-production phase.

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"Documentary filmmaking is special for the youngsters to have something to look back on and be proud of!"

Project Partner

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Planning and Pre-Production

Developing objectives and themes through ethnographic research techniques

In the planning and pre-production phase of ethnographic documentary-making, identifying clear objectives and themes is essential. This involves using ethnographic research techniques to ensure the documentary resonates with its intended audience and accurately represents the portrayed community. Using ethnographic research techniques means diving deep into the lives and cultures of the people being documented to understand and represent their experiences accurately. This approach is especially important for youth work because it helps to authentically capture the voices and stories of young people in their unique contexts.

According to the guide on [documentary filmmaking in youth projects](#) when working with documentary filmmaking in youth projects, it is helpful to address the question of **“the power of filmmaking”** at an early stage - What do we want to achieve by documenting the realities? **What is our message?**

Besides, some of the important processes that we need to follow in the planning phase are:

- ▶ Start by **understanding who the documentary is for**. Analyze the demographic, cultural, and social characteristics of your target group. This helps in tailoring the content to their interests, needs, and concerns, making the documentary more relevant and engaging.
- ▶ Apply **intersectional approach** while analysing local groups and realities. Intersectionality is a term used to describe the idea that social relations involve multiple intersecting forms of discrimination. This means that a person might experience several forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and ableism, all at the same time. In the context of youth work, incorporating an intersectional approach is crucial for understanding and addressing the complex and varied experiences of young people.

- ▶ Spend time in the community you are documenting. Engage in **immersive observations** where you participate in daily activities and observe interactions, traditions, and routines. This approach provides a deeper understanding of the community's way of life and helps in identifying authentic themes that resonate with their experiences. This can be done by conducting interviews, participating in conversations, and listening to personal stories. Building trust is essential. This also ensures that the themes and objectives of the documentary reflect the true essence of the community's experiences.
- ▶ **Fact-check all information** to avoid spreading misinformation. Use credible sources and data to maintain the integrity of the documentary.



Technical side of the preparations and team-building

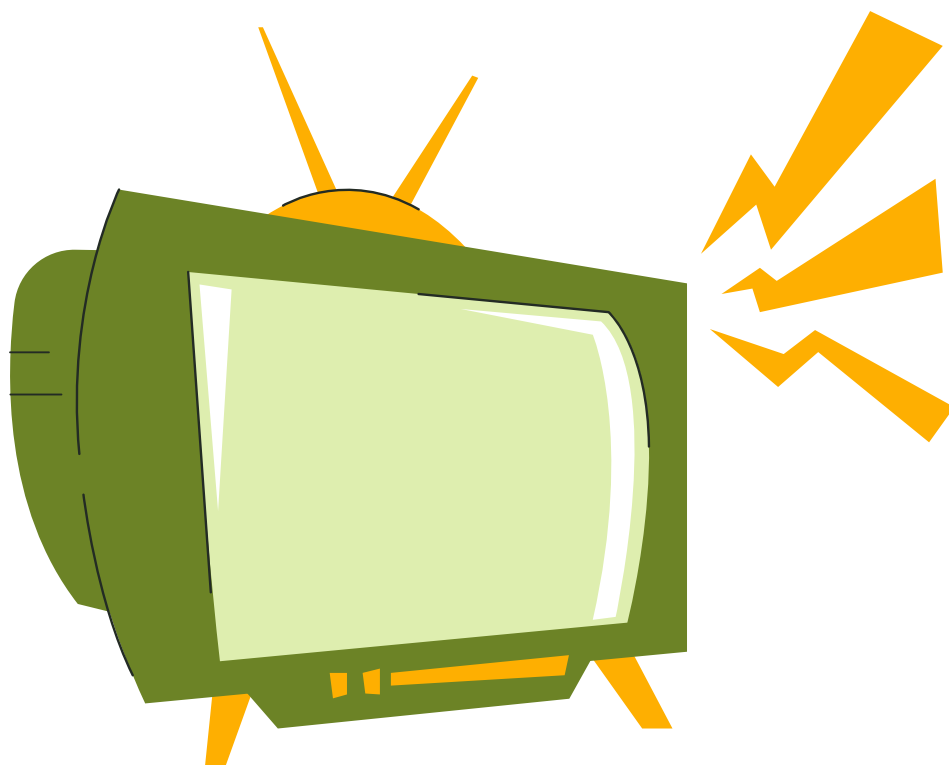
The technical side of preparations for making a documentary does not necessarily require expensive and advanced equipment. **Many impactful ethnographic films have been created using smartphones**, which are now equipped with high-quality cameras. However, if the budget allows, investing in a few key pieces of equipment can enhance the production quality. A good digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) or mirrorless camera, a tripod for stable shots, external microphones for clear audio, and basic lighting equipment can significantly improve the final product.

Youth involved in filmmaking can also consider borrowing equipment from friends, community centers, or educational institutions, or outsourcing specific tasks to other organisations active in the community. Planning and prioritizing within the allocated budget ensures that one can make the most of the available resources while maintaining the essence and authenticity of the story being told.

Thanks to the digital skills that today's youth possess, one of the partner organizations noted that "the materials, such as phones, cameras, editing software, and social media, were easy to use and made the entire process feel natural for the young participants."

Apart from the technical side of the planning, collaboration and clear communication among team members are vital for a smooth production process. Building a group responsible for the documentary-making process fosters teamwork, creativity, and a sense of responsibility among participating youth.

The project partner organization highlighted that one of the most challenging moments in the filmmaking process was facilitating the process of young people choosing the topic they wanted to present in their documentaries. The diverse interests of group members and the dynamics within the group made reaching a consensus particularly difficult. Therefore, using youth work approaches for team building is critical to forming a motivated group. These approaches include **participatory decision-making**, in which every team member has a say in the planning and execution stages, and experiential learning, which enables youth to learn by doing and commenting on their experiences. Don't forget about **edutainment** – educate and entertain at the same time!



Crafting a narrative and storytelling techniques

In every documentary, whether it explores the lives of individuals, communities, nature, traditions, or daily habits, **storytelling** stands as the cornerstone of the filmmaking process. Each film presents a narrative that is crafted to inform, engage, and inspire its audience. Crafting a compelling narrative is a pivotal aspect of the planning phase. It involves identifying the core themes and messages that the documentary aims to convey and structuring the storyline in a way that keeps the viewers interested in the story.

According to the [Storytelling for Youth Work Multimedia Guide](#) following elements need to be considered for good storytelling:

- ▶ Authenticity
- ▶ Emotional connection
- ▶ Memorability
- ▶ Invitation to act

> See [8 classic storytelling techniques for engaging presentations](#) which can also be useful for storytelling element in documentary-making.

The following techniques can be useful in crafting a compelling narrative for the documentary film project:

Brainstorming is a group problem-solving technique involving the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members. Various approaches can be used, including open discussion, doodling, mind mapping, and more.

Identifying characters and their stories: This phase entails diving into the lives and experiences of people who will appear significantly in the documentary.

Role-play and simulations: This technique brings storytelling to life by allowing participants to immerse themselves in the shoes of another role. It creates a more engaging and memorable learning experience within a safe environment.



Filming and production

Shooting techniques and audio-visual methodologies

Effective filming techniques are crucial to capturing authentic, engaging content in ethnographic documentary making in youth work and beyond. While there is no one-size-fits-all recipe that applies to all stories in documentary filmmaking, the following techniques can help the filming process:

Start with **wide-angle views** that set the scene and provide essential context. These shots might feature community centers, parks, or schools, offering a visual introduction that helps the audience understand the setting and environment.

Once the scene is set, the focus shifts to **medium and close-up shots**. Medium shots capture interactions between individuals, while close-ups highlight emotions and details, showcasing the personal experiences and expressions of the people involved.

Ethnographic documentaries often use an **observational filming approach**, capturing events as they naturally unfold without intervention. Deciding between handheld and tripod shots is another key aspect. Handheld shots can add a sense of immediacy and intimacy but must be used carefully to avoid excessive shakiness. In contrast, tripods are useful for stable, composed shots, particularly during interviews.

Additionally, capturing supplementary **B-roll footage** is helpful. B-roll can include shots of the environment, relevant objects, or background activities, providing valuable material for creating seamless transitions and adding depth to the story. More information about B-roll shots can be found [here](#).

Incorporating **natural sounds** can significantly enhance the authenticity of the documentary. Environmental sounds, conversations, and relevant background noises add context to the visual narrative, making the scenes more immersive.

Lighting plays a critical role in the quality of the footage. Natural light is often the best option, but portable lighting equipment becomes necessary for indoor or low-light situations. Proper lighting ensures that subjects are well-lit, their expressions clear, and their surroundings visible. Visual storytelling through metaphors and symbolism can convey deeper meanings. For instance, filming a youth's hands as they create art can symbolize creativity and expression.

➤ For more technical recommendations on shooting techniques, watch the [video](#).

Possible on-spot challenges and solutions

When working with young people, gaining their trust is paramount. **A peer-to-peer approach** has proven to be particularly effective in youth work which can contribute to building trust between youth. One project partner noted that "acting and/or trying to make things look better and being different from how they are" posed a significant challenge. To address this, the team of filmmakers should invest time in building genuine relationships with the participants. By spending time with them, explaining the purpose of the project, and ensuring that their voices are heard and respected, filmmakers can create a more authentic and comfortable filming environment.

Another frequent issue is **managing unpredictable environments**. Locations like community centers or outdoor spaces can be noisy or chaotic, affecting audio quality and visual stability. Flexible filming schedules can mitigate these challenges. Getting noise-canceling equipment might be too expensive; therefore, focusing on finding cost-effective solutions is the key.

One of the project partners mentioned that getting used to new equipment, the new technology, and fixing sound was challenging during the filming process, however, the staff struggled more than the young people with the equipment. Considering that youth are quite comfortable with technologies influenced by creating content for social media.

Additionally, technical difficulties with equipment, such as battery failures or memory card issues, can disrupt the filming process. Being prepared with backup equipment and conducting regular checks throughout the shoot can prevent these setbacks.

Despite the challenges that may arise during the process, our project partners reported that filming and editing sessions with young people were both **explorative and enjoyable**. Additionally, the project fostered collaboration between organizations and led to the planning of a Youth Exchange program for young people from Romania and Ireland.

"[... the advantage of documentary filmmaking is to] populate the digital space with **quality** materials created **BY** young people and **ABOUT** young people. **quality** refers to the fact that the creation of this work is guided by a youth worker, its non-discriminatory and doesn't represent a threat to the viewers in any way."

Project Partner

Post-production process

Assembling and editing the footage

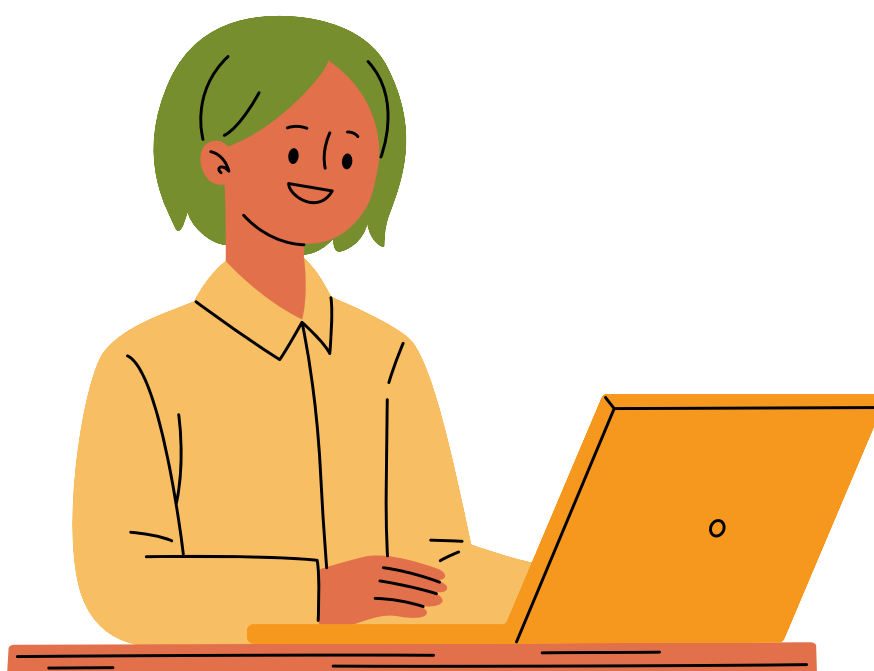
Assembling and editing the footage is where the story of the ethnographic documentary really comes together. This phase involves thoroughly reviewing all the recorded material, choosing the most impactful clips, and organizing them to build a cohesive and engaging narrative. Editors must carefully balance the chronological flow of events with the thematic and emotional elements of the story. This includes

- ▶ cutting unnecessary footage;
- ▶ refining transitions;
- ▶ and adding elements like voiceovers or music to enhance the overall storytelling.

It's essential to preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices while ensuring the final edit is both visually captivating and logically structured. The objective is to produce a documentary that genuinely reflects the youth's experiences and effectively connects with the audience.

However, as project partners reflected, "combining the different kinds of footage into a coherent story" was among the challenges. Nevertheless, **"digitalisation of the materials is an advantage - everything can be shared instantly."**

Here are some editing software options that fit various needs and skill levels, from beginner to professional. Each of these options has its own strengths, so the best choice depends on the specific needs, budget, and level of expertise.



For Beginners:

- ▶ iMovie (Mac)
- ▶ Windows Video Editor (Windows)

For Intermediate Users:

- ▶ Adobe Premiere Elements
- ▶ DaVinci Resolve

For Advanced Users:

- ▶ Adobe Premiere Pro
- ▶ Final Cut Pro (Mac)
- ▶ Avid Media Composer

For Specialized Needs:

- ▶ HitFilm Express

Features: VFX capabilities, compositing tools, and a range of effects.

Ideal For: Projects requiring special effects and visual enhancements;

- ▶ Lightworks

Features: Advanced editing tools, multi-format support, and a professional interface.

Ideal For: Editors looking for a high level of control and customization.



Reflection and evaluation

Reflection and evaluation are essential components of the ethnographic documentary process, especially within the context of youth work. This phase involves thoroughly reviewing the completed documentary to assess how effectively it captures the intended story and represents the participants' experiences. It includes collecting and analyzing feedback from viewers, participants, and collaborators to understand the documentary's reception and impact. This **reflective process** also involves evaluating the filming and editing techniques used, recognizing any challenges encountered, and identifying areas for improvement. In youth work, reflection and evaluation are not only crucial for refining practices and ensuring the documentary's accuracy and engagement but also serve as a significant learning component. They provide valuable insights that help youth workers and filmmakers learn from their experiences, adapt their methods, and enhance their future projects.



"Being in the role of the filmmaker also raises interests about movies and documentaries generally, which is very positive, having mind that young people hardly decide to dedicate their time to watching movies and especially documentaries."

Project Partner





Showcasing and dissemination

This phase involves presenting the completed documentary through various platforms and events to maximize its visibility and influence. Showcasing may include organizing screening events, participating in film festivals, or collaborating with community organizations to reach target audiences. Dissemination extends beyond initial screenings to include sharing the documentary through digital platforms, such as social media, online streaming services, and educational websites.

In youth work, showcasing and dissemination of the activities, including documentaries, are crucial for amplifying the voices of youth - highlighting significant issues, and fostering community engagement. These activities help bring attention to important topics and **promote dialogue and understanding** within the community.

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"Doing this movie helped us overcome the main problem that we had, which was how to get young people interested in what we do. We learned a lot during the process."

Project Partner

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Ethical considerations

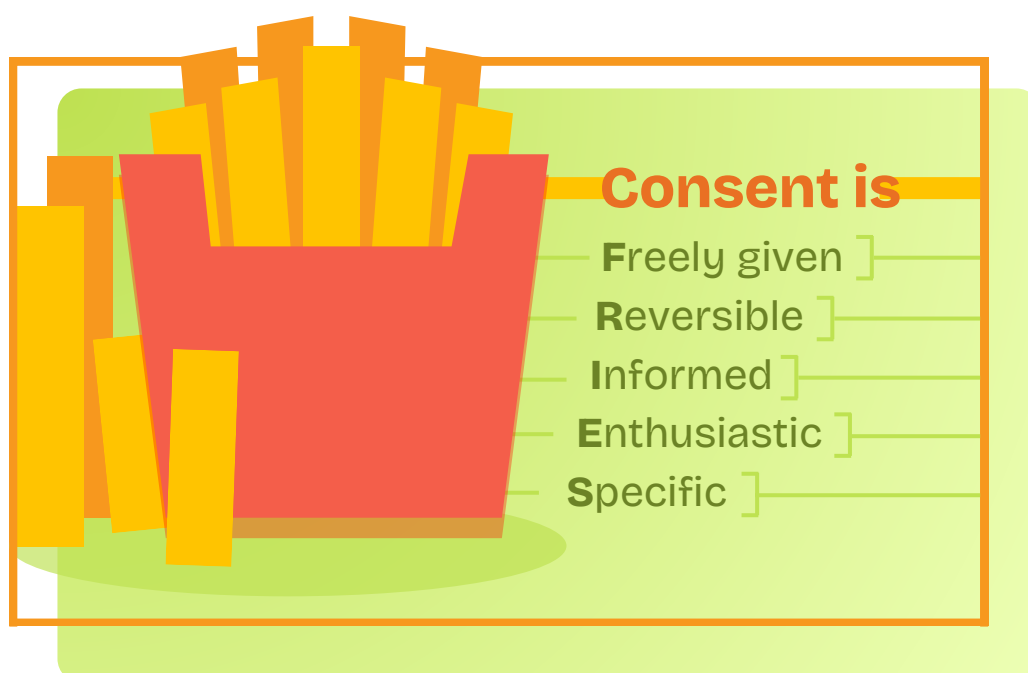
Informed consent and permissions

"It's important that both the people in front of and behind the camera are aware of what they are getting into.

KULTUROPA

Ethical considerations are paramount in ethnographic documentary making, particularly when working with young people. Always obtain informed consent from participants and respect their privacy. Be transparent about how the footage will be used and ensure that the portrayal is respectful and accurate. Consider the ethical implications of your filming and editing choices, especially when working with vulnerable youth populations. The informed consent must be obtained voluntarily, without coercion, and should be documented through written agreements.

Permissions are also critical and encompass more than just consent. They involve securing the necessary rights to use participants' images, voices, and personal stories. This includes obtaining permissions for filming in specific locations and using any proprietary material that may be featured in the documentary. Filmmakers must clearly communicate how the footage will be distributed and shown, ensuring that participants are comfortable with how their stories will be portrayed and shared.



"Do nothing that would violate the humanity of your subject and nothing that would compromise the trust of your audience."

Bill Nichols

Representation and cultural sensitivity

It is essential to approach the topic or community being filmed with respect and awareness, make sure that the process accurately reflects the **cultural contexts and lived experiences**. This involves avoiding stereotypes and misrepresentations and engaging with the community in a way that honors their values and perspectives.



"If I had another chance to make a documentary movie and had no time limits I would focus on the situation of LGBTQ+ people in Romania and try to convince the Orthodox Church that they are not bad people."

Young filmmaker



Filmmakers need to make sure that the voices of participants are heard and respected, while being aware of and sensitive to their cultural elements. They should also try to represent the diversity within the community, highlighting different perspectives and experiences to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive narrative. Understanding intersectionality of various identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, helps us to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of individuals' lived experiences.

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"Make sure that young people get ownership over the stories and the messages conveyed through the movies"

Project Partner

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Safeguarding and confidentiality

Safeguarding involves implementing measures to protect participants from harm, abuse, and exploitation throughout the documentary-making process. This includes obtaining informed consent, ensuring that participants understand their rights, and providing a safe environment during filming. Involved youth workers must be particularly attentive in identifying and mitigating any potential risks - participants' well-being needs to be prioritized in any case.

Refer to the following websites to learn more about safeguarding in youth work:

- UK National Youth Agency [“Safeguarding and Risk Management Hub”](#)
- Oxfam [“Introduction to Youth Safeguarding Training”](#)
- Youth Scotland [“Youth Work Essential – Safeguarding”](#)
- NYCI (National Youth Council of Ireland) [Child Safeguarding Statement](#)
- Children First by Tusla - Child and Family Agency - [national policy guidance for all matters concerning the welfare and protection of children in Ireland](#)

Confidentiality requires careful handling of personal information shared by participants. It is crucial to maintain the privacy of individuals who contribute to the documentary, protecting their identities and sensitive information from unauthorized access or disclosure. This involves



secure **storage of data**;

anonymizing footage where necessary;

and obtaining **explicit permission** before sharing any personal details;

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"Prepare the on- and off-screen participants for the mental impact the film process might have on their lives. Will they see or experience new things that might be shocking or life-changing for them?"

Documentary filmmaking in youth projects

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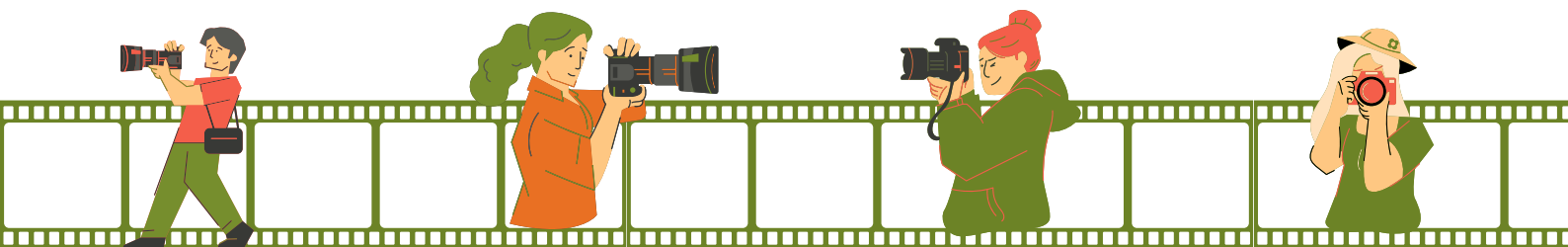


Closing thoughts

Filmmaking, particularly ethnographic documentary making, stands out as a powerful and effective methodology in youth work. It provides young people with a dynamic and interactive way to express themselves, explore their communities, and address issues that matter to them. The process of filmmaking allows youth to develop **a wide range of skills**, from technical abilities in handling cameras and editing software to soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking. Moreover, **storytelling** as one of the methods used in ethnographic filmmaking allows them to express their perspectives, document their realities, and share their unique narratives with a broader audience. This not only fosters a sense of empowerment and pride but also helps to bridge the gap between rural youth and the wider society, challenging stereotypes and praising the diversity of rural life.

Ethnographic documentary-making aligns with the **key principles of youth work**, which emphasizes **participation, inclusion, and social change**. Through this methodology, youth workers can facilitate a deeper understanding of cultural practices, social dynamics, and environmental issues within rural communities. Documentaries serve as a compelling tool to raise awareness and advocate for critical issues such as ecology and sustainability. They provide a platform for young voices to be heard, promoting dialogue and understanding both within their communities and beyond. These documentaries can also influence policymakers, stakeholders, and the general public, driving positive change and recognition for rural youth work. Therefore, it can be used as a powerful advocacy tool.

With this guide, the Rural Youth Cinema project team aims to enrich the field of youth work and ethnographic documentary-making. Although these areas have not yet been extensively studied together, this guide offers an introduction to the key concepts and practices.



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