



Research Paper

Exploring Challenges in Documentary Filmmaking: A Case Study Of Communication Studies Undergraduates At Trincomalee Campus.

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the challenges faced by Communication Studies undergraduates at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, in documentary filmmaking. As part of their curriculum, students are required to produce a documentary in the "Beginning Video Production" course, which integrates both theoretical knowledge and practical filmmaking skills. The research aims to identify the technical, ethical, and creative difficulties that students encounter, assess the applicability of classroom theory to real-world production, and provide recommendations for improving the learning process. Through a survey methodology, 75 questionnaires were distributed across three student batches, gathering insights into the major challenges in documentary production, including difficulties with camera techniques, editing, narrative structure, and ethical considerations. The findings indicate that students struggle with applying theoretical knowledge to practical aspects of filmmaking, particularly in the areas of technical execution and time management. Moreover, the study highlights resource limitations, such as inadequate equipment and technical issues, as significant obstacles. Despite these challenges, students expressed the importance of improving practical skills, advanced editing techniques, and ethical awareness. The study suggests that curriculum enhancements, better resource allocation, and a greater focus on hands-on learning could help overcome these challenges and better prepare students for future documentary filmmaking endeavors.

Keywords:- Documentary films, Trincomalee Campus, Technical elements, Camera, Editing.

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I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Documentary filmmaking is widely recognized as a powerful medium for capturing reality, raising awareness, and advocating for social justice (Aufderheide, 2007). It plays a crucial role in media and communication studies by allowing filmmakers to construct narratives based on real-life experiences and societal issues (Nichols, 2017). The process of documentary production involves various stages, including research, pre-production, filming, and post-production, all of which require technical proficiency, storytelling skills, and critical thinking (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020).

However, undergraduate students often face multiple challenges in documentary filmmaking due to their limited technical expertise, access to resources, and understanding of ethical considerations (Bernard, 2016). These challenges may include difficulties in conceptualizing compelling narratives, securing funding, handling equipment, and navigating issues related to subject consent and representation (Rose, 2014). Moreover, the collaborative nature of documentary production necessitates teamwork and effective communication, skills that students may still be developing (Van Sijll, 2013).

Additionally, the rapid advancement of digital media has transformed the documentary landscape, providing students with innovative tools for storytelling but also posing new challenges in terms of media literacy and technological adaptation (Hight, 2018). As digital platforms continue to evolve, student filmmakers must

balance artistic creativity with the technical demands of production, distribution, and audience engagement (Ellis & McLane, 2015).

Beyond technical and logistical challenges, students must also navigate ethical and legal issues such as informed consent, privacy rights, and fair representation of subjects (Winston, 2012). Ethical dilemmas often arise when dealing with sensitive topics, requiring students to balance their creative vision with journalistic integrity and social responsibility (Nash, 2014). Engaging in documentary filmmaking, particularly on socially and emotionally charged topics, can be mentally and emotionally demanding for students (Renov, 2004). The process of interacting with real people and communities, especially those experiencing hardship, requires empathy, resilience, and professional detachment, skills that students may struggle to develop (Aufderheide, 2017).

Documentary filmmaking is not only an artistic endeavor but also an educational tool that fosters critical thinking, media literacy, and social awareness among students (Winton, 2013). Through the process of creating documentaries, students engage in research, storytelling, and visual communication, skills that are essential in both academic and professional settings (Spence & Navarro, 2011). Given these complexities, there is a growing need to explore the specific difficulties faced by undergraduate students in documentary filmmaking and identify strategies to enhance their learning experiences. Understanding these challenges can contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical approaches in film and media education (Jenkins, 2019).

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by Communication Studies undergraduates in Trincomalee Campus while engaging in documentary filmmaking. By identifying these challenges, the research seeks to provide insights that can contribute to curriculum improvements, better resource allocation, and enhanced learning experiences for future students.

1.1. Documentary Filmmaking and Curriculum Structure

A well-structured documentary filmmaking course provides students with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, enabling them to create impactful visual narratives. Such a course typically follows a systematic approach covering all key stages of production, ensuring that students develop a comprehensive understanding of documentary filmmaking (Aufderheide, 2007).

Introduction to Documentary Theory – This foundational stage familiarizes students with the history, genres, and influential works in documentary cinema. Key theorists such as John Grierson, known for coining the term "documentary" and Dziga Vertov, famous for *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), are studied to provide insights into different documentary styles and approaches (Barnouw, 1993).

Pre-Production Planning – This phase focuses on the initial development of a documentary project. Students engage in research, idea generation, scriptwriting, and logistical planning to structure their storytelling effectively. They also learn about ethical considerations and best practices in documentary filmmaking, particularly regarding representation and consent (Nichols, 2017).

Production Techniques – This stage involves hands-on training in technical aspects such as camera operation, lighting, sound recording, and interview techniques. Students gain practical experience in shooting footage while ensuring high-quality visuals and audio (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020).

Post-Production – In the final stage, students learn video editing, sound design, and the use of industry-standard software such as Adobe Premiere Pro and Final Cut Pro. This phase emphasizes the importance of pacing, visual storytelling, and effective narrative construction in the editing process (Dancyger, 2018).

By incorporating these stages into the curriculum, documentary filmmaking courses provide students with the necessary tools to produce meaningful and socially relevant films. The combination of theoretical study and hands-on practice helps students develop storytelling skills, technical proficiency, and a deeper understanding of the role of documentary cinema in society (Winston, Vanstone & Chi, 2017).

1.1.2 Documentary Filmmaking in Trincomalee Campus

At Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, documentary filmmaking is an integral part of the Communication Studies curriculum. The course "Beginning Video Production" (COMM 3163) is offered in the second semester for third-year students. This three-credit course comprises both theoretical and practical components, with two credits allocated for theoretical instruction and one credit dedicated to hands-on practice. As a core requirement, students must produce a documentary film by the end of the semester, which serves as a key evaluation component.

This course is designed as a practical, hands-on learning experience that introduces students to the fundamental principles and techniques of video production. It aims to equip students with the necessary vocabulary, aesthetic sensibilities, and systematic and technical skills required for effective video storytelling. Emphasis is placed on visual communication, where students learn how to convey messages through the video medium and utilize the "grammar" of image and sound to create compelling narratives.

Upon successful completion of "Beginning Video Production," students will be able to:

- Understand and apply conceptual, organizational, technical, and aesthetic principles underlying video communication and storytelling.
- Demonstrate proficiency in operating video production equipment, including cameras, lighting, and sound recording tools.
- Gain hands-on experience in field production and develop familiarity with post-production techniques such as editing and sound design.
- Apply effective pre-production planning techniques, including research, scriptwriting, and the preparation of written materials.
- Explore diverse production styles and practices, particularly in the creation of personal digital storytelling.
- Develop collaborative skills essential for working as part of a production team.

By integrating both theory and practice, the course enables students to develop a strong foundation in documentary filmmaking, preparing them for future endeavors in media production, journalism, and visual storytelling.

1.2. Research Objectives:

General Objective:

To explore the challenges in documentary filmmaking among Communication Studies undergraduates at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University.

Specific Objective:

To identify the challenges faced by students in documentary filmmaking, including technical, ethical, and creative difficulties.

To assess whether students find it easy to apply the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to practical documentary production.

To gather recommendations on how to overcome the challenges students face in documentary filmmaking, with a focus on improving both the learning process and practical execution.

1.3. Research Questions

- What are the key challenges faced by Communication Studies undergraduates at Trincomalee Campus in the process of documentary filmmaking?
- To what extent do students find it challenging to apply theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to the practical aspects of documentary filmmaking?
- What recommendations do students have for overcoming the challenges faced during documentary filmmaking?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are generally two types of methods used to collect data in research. Primary and secondary data collection methods are used to conduct research. Primary data is explained as the data collected by the researcher to address the research questions.

2.1. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Survey methodology refers to the systematic approach used to collect data from a sample of people through the use of surveys. It involves designing questions, selecting a sample, collecting responses, and analyzing the data to understand attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or demographics. Surveys can be used in various fields such as social sciences, business, healthcare, and education

A survey is a research technique used to gather data from a predetermined sample of respondents in order to learn more and acquire insights into a range of interesting topics. Depending on the approach used and the objective of the study, they can be used for a variety of reasons and by researchers in a variety of ways. (Adi Bhat, Global VP).

The present study has questionnaires, one of the survey methods to examine the research problem.

75 questionnaires will be given to the undergraduate students in Trincomalee Campus.

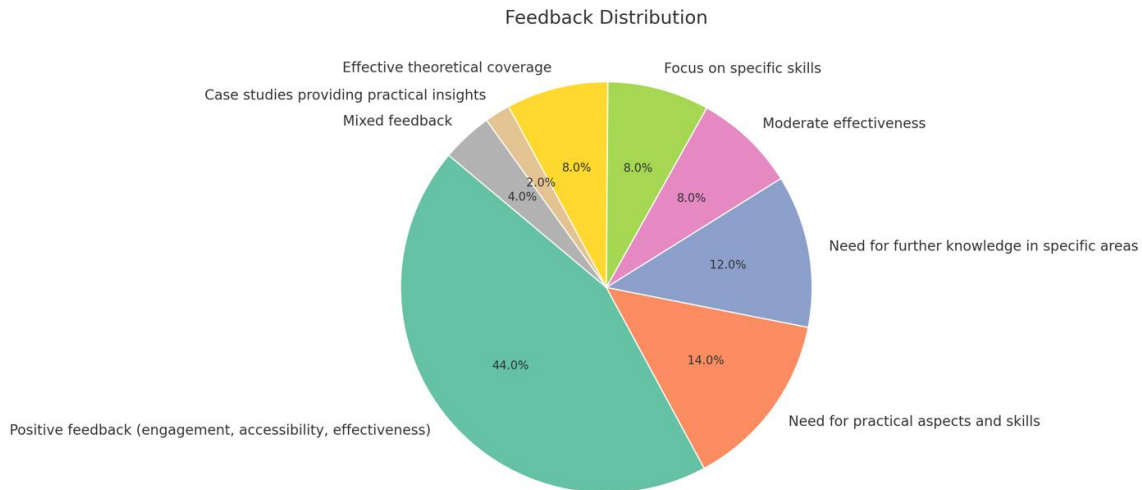
The sample will be collected as below,

- 25 from 17/18 batch in the department of Languages and Communication Studies
- 25 from 18/19 batch in the department of Languages and Communication Studies
- 25 from 19/20 batch in the department of Languages and Communication Studies.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Only 5% of the respondents have the experience of making documentary movies before they study the subject Beginning Video Production and the rest of the respondents have made their very first documentaries after they studied the subject Beginning Video Production.

The candidates found the following major theoretical concepts difficult to understand during the course: Camera Techniques (Shots, Angles, Movement, Exposure): 22.9%; Editing (Software, Methods, Processes): 20.8%; Theoretical Concepts (Agenda-setting, Communication Theories, Ethics, etc.): 16.7%; Narrative Structure & Storytelling: 14.6%; Production Stages (Pre, Production, Post): 10.4%; Data Collection & Research: 4.2%; Language Barriers & Software Issues: 4.2%; Practical Challenges: 2.1%; Time Management & Practical Challenges: 2.1%; Mise-en-scène & Visual Aesthetics: 2.1%



The following analysis reveals the respondents' opinions regarding the course material's efficacy in addressing the theoretical facets of documentary production. Positive comments (excellent, extremely effective, well-covered, accessible, and engaged): 44%, Need for further knowledge in particular areas (pre-production, post-production, advanced editing, ethical considerations, sensitive topics): 12%; need for practical aspects and abilities (practical skills, practical aspects above theoretical): 14% Moderate efficacy (effective, but not very good): 8%, Concentrate on specialised abilities (such as DSLR cameras, video editing, and the utilisation of pictures, angles, etc.): 8%, Good theoretical coverage (had a solid basis and important details): 8%, Case studies offering useful information: 2% and Negative but weak feedback: 4%.

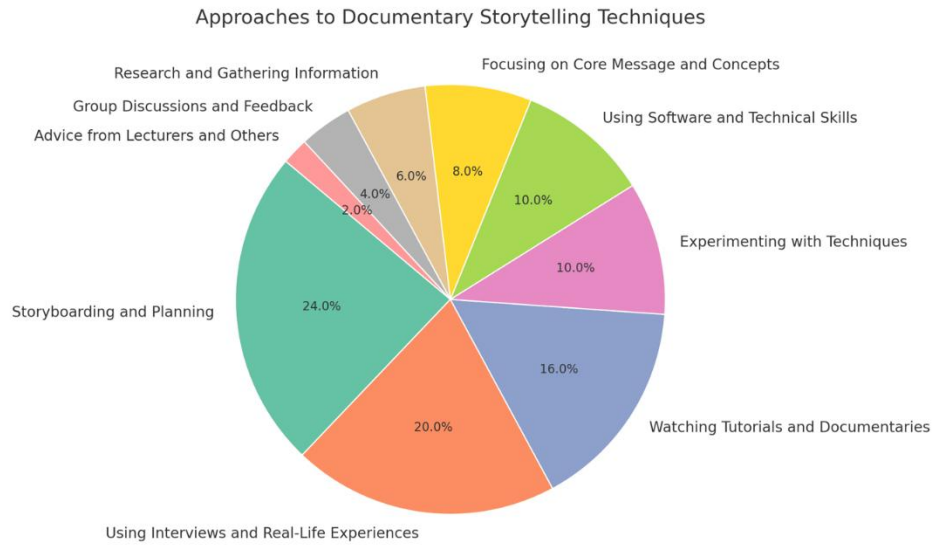
The following breakdown shows the respondents' opinions regarding the usefulness or difficulty of particular readings or resources.

Beneficial Resources (documentaries in class, YouTube videos, books on documentary filmmaking, Adobe Premiere Pro manuals, and video tutorials): 52% Difficult Resources: 22% Readings on ethics, narrative structure, technological resources, obtaining accurate information, abstract theoretical writings, and lack of a camera.

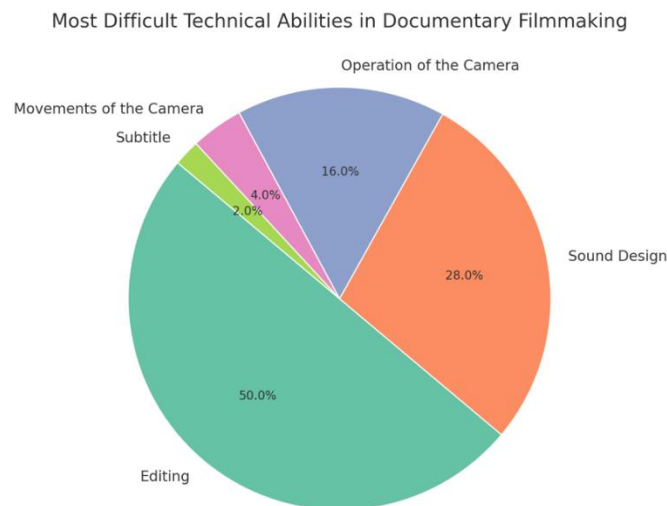
Feedback that is both beneficial and challenging (mixed): 8%

18% of responses were generally affirmative (yes).

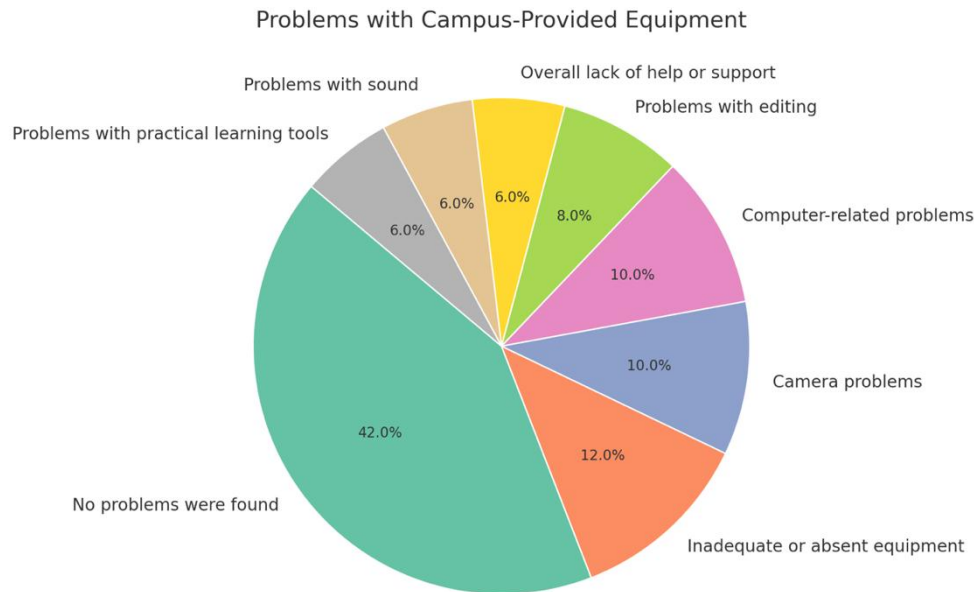
The respondents' methods for grasping and utilizing documentary storytelling strategies in their work are highlighted in this breakdown. Planning and Storyboarding (storyboard creation, research, planning, sketching, and scripting): 24% Using Interviews and Real-Life Experiences (building narrative through interviews, highlighting real-life experiences, capturing real voices): 20% Watching Documentaries and Tutorials (YouTube videos, past documentaries, and narrative-style tutorials): 16% 10% of the production process is spent experimenting with various transitions, cinematography, and sound design. Using Technical Skills and Software (Adobe Premiere Pro, video editing, editing software, and camera shots): 10% Concentrating on the Main Idea and Concepts (determining the main idea, adhering to theoretical concepts): 8% Research and Information Collection (social problem research, resource collection): 6% Group Conversations and Comments (taking part in group conversations and receiving comments from teachers and peers): 4%



The technical abilities that respondents considered most difficult to acquire and apply in documentary filmmaking are highlighted in this breakdown. 50% editing Sound Design: 28% Operation of the Camera: 16% Movements of the Camera: 4% Subtitle: 2%



The primary problems that respondents had with the school-provided equipment are highlighted in this breakdown. No problems were found: 42 %, Inadequate or absent equipment: 12 %, Camera problems (battery life, lens sharpness, etc.): 10%, 10% of problems are related to computers (restricted computers, broken PCs, software problems). Problems with editing (missing videos, software difficulties): 8%, Overall lack of help or support: 6%, Problems with sound: 6%, Problems with practical learning tools: 6% .

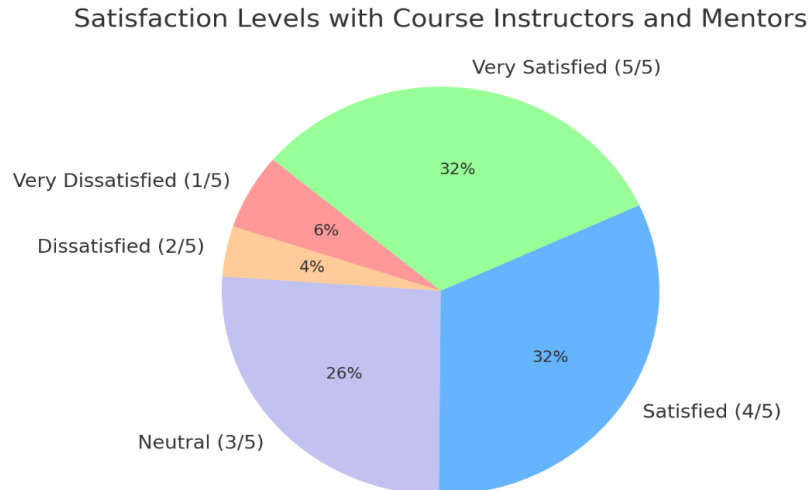


Making and adhering to timetables, comprehensive schedules, and scheduling every step: 36%, Allocating Specific Periods (1-2 weeks for pre-production, filming, and editing): 18%; Planning and Storyboarding (writing script boards, creating storyboards, conducting research, and planning): 22% 10% of the time is spent juggling other tasks, such as managing time during BVP special hours, non-lecture periods, and juggling several productions. Handling Difficulties and Problems (editing difficulties, unwillingness to supply voice cut, timing constraints because of illness): 8%, Making Effective Use of Available Time (free periods for editing, concentrated sessions): 6% demonstrates the time management techniques used by the responders at various documentary production phases.

The percentages of the primary logistical difficulties respondents encountered during documentary production are as follows: Obtaining shooting permissions: 41%, location scouting: 22%, scheduling: 17%, transportation: 6%, and editing: 4%, 4% were related to finding participants (such as interviews), and 6% were related to other specific issues (such as weather or background noise).

The below breakdown highlights the main difficulties respondents faced in collaborating with team members or interview subjects and how they handled them; No difficulties experienced: 24%, Trust and communication issues (building trust, lack of transparency): 16%, Interviewee reluctance or refusal (unwilling to be on camera, refused to provide information): 14%, Team disagreements and coordination (scheduling conflicts, differing opinions): 12%, Handling language barriers (simplified questions, used English for Tamil speakers): 8%, Weather and outdoor challenges (outdoor interviews, background noise): 8%, Providing proof and permissions (showing permission letters, explaining projects): 6%, Group discussions and compromises: 4%, Handling technical issues (small microphone for noise): 4%, individual challenges (making video alone, managing multiple productions): 4%.

The summary of the responses in terms of satisfaction levels with the course instructors and mentors: 6% of respondents were very dissatisfied, 4% were dissatisfied, 26% were neutral, 32% were satisfied, and 32% were very satisfied.



Among all the responders, 68% found workshops or other resources were helpful to make documentaries. To create the documentary, 52% of the respondents used tutorials, 20% sought aid from professionals in the field, 6% sought guidance from their seniors, and 22% did not seek out any outside help.

The most fulfilling aspects of making documentaries, according to respondents, were editing (38%), seeing the finished product (12%), learning and gaining experience (16%), recognising and emphasising social issues 6%, shooting (10%), telling meaningful stories (10%), educating and motivating others (4%), and technical skills (such as using Adobe Premiere Pro) (4%).

Editing Process: 26%, Time Management (more time for specific stages, reducing interview duration): 22%, Equipment and Resources (computers, camera angles, techniques): 14%, Planning and Pre-production: 10%. Changes to Topic or Content: 8%, Sound Balancing and Voice Overs: 6% are the aspects respondents would change about the documentary production process.

Plan Thoroughly and Be Organised: 24%: Learn and Practice Editing Techniques Early; 20%: Focus on Storytelling and Creativity; 14%: Manage Time Effectively; 10%: Practice hands-on skills (camera work, software); 10%: Follow the Course Only if Interested; 6%, Seek Help and Stay Flexible: 6%, Understand and Apply Theoretical Concepts: 6%, Appreciate the Course's Value: 4% are the advice suggested by the respondents to their juniors who are going to make documentaries.

IV. CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal that the majority of undergraduate students had no prior experience in documentary filmmaking before studying "Beginning Video Production." Despite this, they successfully created their first documentaries after completing the course. However, several challenges were identified in the theoretical and practical aspects of filmmaking.

Key Challenges Identified:

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Difficulties:
 - Students struggled with key filmmaking concepts such as camera techniques (22.9%), editing (20.8%), communication theories (16.7%), and narrative structure (14.6%).
 - These difficulties suggest a need for a more engaging and hands-on approach to teaching theoretical components.
2. Course Material Effectiveness:
 - 44% of respondents found the course materials effective, while 12% expressed a need for more knowledge in areas such as pre-production, post-production, and ethical considerations.
 - 14% stressed the importance of more practical skills, indicating a gap between theoretical learning and real-world application.
3. Technical Challenges in Filmmaking:
 - Editing (50%), sound design (28%), and camera operation (16%) were the most difficult skills to acquire.
 - These challenges highlight the importance of additional hands-on training and workshops to strengthen students' technical skills.
4. Logistical and Equipment Constraints:

- While 42% reported no issues, 12% faced inadequate equipment, 10% had computer/software problems, and 8% encountered editing difficulties.
- Additionally, logistical issues such as shooting permissions (41%), location scouting (22%), and scheduling (17%) were major obstacles.
- 5. Collaboration and Communication Issues:
 - 24% of students had no difficulties, but others faced trust and communication issues (16%), interviewee reluctance (14%), and team coordination problems (12%).
 - Language barriers and outdoor challenges also impacted production quality.
- 6. Support from Instructors and External Resources:
 - 64% of students were satisfied with their instructors and mentors, while 10% expressed dissatisfaction.
 - 68% found workshops helpful, and 52% relied on tutorials for additional guidance.
- 7. Most Rewarding Aspects of Filmmaking:
 - Editing (38%) was the most fulfilling aspect, followed by learning and gaining experience (16%) and seeing the final product (12%).
 - Students also valued the opportunity to highlight social issues and tell meaningful stories.
- 8. Recommended Improvements for Future Documentary Projects:
 - Better planning and time management (36%) were identified as key areas for improvement.
 - More focus on editing techniques (26%), improving equipment availability (14%), and sound balancing (6%) were also suggested.

Conclusion & Recommendations:

The findings indicate that while students gained valuable experience in documentary filmmaking, they encountered significant theoretical, technical, and logistical challenges. The course provided a solid foundation, but enhancements are needed in practical training, access to better equipment, and structured mentorship.

To improve the documentary filmmaking experience for future students, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhance Practical Learning – Increase hands-on workshops, introduce real-world projects, and provide more interactive sessions on camera techniques, editing, and storytelling.
2. Improve Access to Equipment – Ensure students have access to high-quality cameras, editing software, and other essential tools.
3. Strengthen Time Management Strategies – Incorporate structured project timelines and encourage early planning.
4. Foster Better Collaboration & Communication – Introduce teamwork exercises to improve coordination and trust among students.
5. Provide Additional Support & Resources – Offer more tutorial sessions, case studies, and mentorship opportunities to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

By addressing these challenges, the documentary filmmaking experience for Communication Studies undergraduates can be significantly improved, better preparing them for professional careers in media production.

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