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Teaching Radio Documentary Production in Brazil: A Freirean Approach

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Abstract

Teaching radio documentary is an art and craft inextricably tied to the country, community, and culture where the form flourishes. How then does one teach it internationally, across all those variables? By localising the documentary course to those factors, as the authors have done in Brazil by applying an educational model native to that country, even though this pedagogy has never been applied to this subject. Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire propounded an emancipatory education model through literacy education and culture communities that cut to the heart of his country's dilemmas via 'posing problems' to challenge social inequalities. Applying this to a class at the University of São Paulo, this approach was combined with that of 19th century Danish educator N.F.S. Grundtvig, a theologian, author, and philosopher who encouraged adults and teenagers to engage with social issues in groups, building community and understanding social issues. The result was the first course in documentary radio taught in Brazil.

Keywords

radio, documentary radio, teaching radio internationally, Gruntvig, Freire

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How does one establish radio documentary studies in a country which lacks a tradition of this form? One starts at the beginning.

Brazil has a long tradition of radio varieties dating back to the medium's beginnings a century ago: music shows, radio drama, radio romanzas (like radionovelas in the rest of Latin America), news broadcasts, interview programmes —Brazil has had tens of thousands of entertainment and information programmes. What they did not have, except for brief periods in the 1980s and 1990s, were programmes made from the creative treatment of actuality, as John Grierson defined the documentary form nearly a century ago.

Below, in sections on Brazil's broadcast history and its U.S. counterparts; in introducing those instructors developing a novel class on documenty; and in explaining its methodology, we offer a narrative of personal experience for our pedagogy for radio documentary, offering both technical skills and socially oriented themes.

Radio History in Brazil

Radio emerged in the country in the early 1920s with the establishment of wireless societies in some major cities. However, its effective development only took place in 1932, when a commercial radio model (and not a public model) was regulated, paving the way for further growth in the following decades. And, unlike what happened in the United States, Brazilian commercial radio developed much more through individual stations rather than large nationwide radio networks (Gambaro, 2019).

In this context, the most prominent station to emerge was Rádio Nacional do Rio de Janeiro. Originally created by a private media group in 1936, it came under Brazilian government control in 1940 (McCann, 2004). Rádio Nacional played a fundamental role in the cultural and political unification project pursued by the Getulio Vargas presidency during the Estado Novo period (1937-1945). It became the leading reference for innovation and quality in Brazilian radio and the main symbol of the country's 'golden age' of radio, which spanned the 1940s and 1950s.

Thus, when Márcia Detoni (2018) states that 'the first radio productions with a documentary character known in Brazil date back to the mid-1940s by Henrique Foreis Domingues, whose programmes over his 24-year career in radio highlighted Brazilian culture and popular music' (Detoni, 2018, p. 45), this was a radio programme developed by Rádio Nacional do Rio de Janeiro. Notably, these were live broadcasts rather than documentaries produced through the editing of pre-recorded material.

According to Detoni, the first steps towards recorded and edited documentary production were taken in the early 1960s by private journalistic radio stations,

particularly Rádio Jornal do Brasil AM in Rio de Janeiro. However, the commercial competition posed by television (introduced in Brazil in the 1950s) and the political censorship and repression of the military dictatorship—which, in 1964, ended the longest democratic period in the country's history—became significant obstacles to this development. (The dictatorship lasted until a process of political normalisation began, only to be completed with the presidential election of 1990.)

The 'brief period' of radio documentary flourishing in Brazil mentioned above, between the 1980s and 1990s, resulted from the convergence of two factors. First, there was the work of Rádio Cultura AM and FM, a São Paulo State public radio station established in 1969. The radio gained prominence during the re-democratisation process, particularly from the 1980s onward. Under the leadership of Irineu Guerrini Jr., previously at the BBC Brazilian Service in London, the station 'began to open space for documentary productions with informational and cultural content' (Detoni, 2018, p. 50).

During this period, other contributions included short-duration documentaries and documentary series occasionally produced by commercial broadcasters, as well as Portuguese-language productions from the BBC Brazilian Service and the Dutch public broadcaster Radio Nederland Wereldomroep (RNW), which were aired in Brazil by local stations (Detoni, 2018).

In the early 21st century, the Brazilian government launched promising initiatives to foster radio documentary production. For the first time in the country's history, public funding called for encouraging independent producers. Additionally, the Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC), a public media initiative, was established in 2008. However, these policies were reversed following the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, marking a period of heightened political conservatism. Concurrently, radio in Brazil entered another phase of decline, with radio documentaries emerging 'only sporadically and through the insistence of a few professionals' (Detoni, 2018, p. 58).

At the same time, radio documentaries began to find a new home in the podcasting sphere in Brazil. American productions deeply rooted in the NPR tradition, such as *Serial* (Sarah Koenig, 2014) and *Radio Ambulante* (Daniel Alarcón, 2011), inspired a new generation of independent Brazilian producers.

Within a few years, Portuguese-language podcasts gained significant public and critical recognition. Notable examples include *Caso Evandro* (Ivan Mizanzuk, 2018) and *Praia dos Ossos* (Branca Viana/Radio Novelo, 2020), which revisited landmark criminal cases in Brazilian history, winning awards, attracting large audiences, and even inspiring video adaptations.

However, this promising scenario also raised several questions: How can connections be established between these podcast productions and Brazil's radio

tradition? Can documentary productions migrate from podcasts to broadcast radio, winning over audiences and reestablishing a tradition within this medium? How can creators, many of whom lack formal journalism training, be equipped with the necessary resources to develop ethically grounded and socially relevant productions? How can an effective pedagogical approach be designed for programmes that diverge significantly from Brazil's live radio tradition? To explore how a Freirean model might work in Brazil, it's worth exploring the corresponding background of one of the largest producers of long-form documentaries in the U.S., the Pacifica Radio network.

Pacifica Radio and the American Documentary Radio Tradition

David King Dunaway, co-instructor of this new course had his start in documentary production while in graduate school at UC-Berkeley, just a few hundred yards from KPFA-Berkeley, the first listener-sponsored radio station in the world and part of the Pacifica Radio network.

As an alternative to the stuffy seminar rooms where little from the outside world peeked in, he wandered down to KPFA, a 24-hour/day station whose founding mission focused on information and fearless debate; where Zen Master Alan Watts had a show introducing Buddhism to American audiences, and the Symbionese Liberation Army, including Berkeley student Patricia Hearst (AKA 'Tania') delivered its revolutionary diatribes.

Pacifica Radio, the first listener-sponsored radio network, has had a profound effect on radio reporting nationally and internationally, particularly documentaries. Its crusading reporting from the Civil Rights movements led to the information-heavy programming of National Public Radio. The history of Pacifica, started in 1948, has always been challenging to present for its fractious internal dynamics and government repression (Lasar, 1999; McKinney, 1966; Dunaway, 2005).

Pacifica changed public and community radio: 1) by its coverage of breaking news; 2) by training historians and political scientists as reporters; 3) by creating an alternate distribution mechanism to 'educational' radio and later NPR with Pacifica's wholly owned stations; and 4) by the creation of actively engaged, highly literate audiences through these measures. And by its unabashedly activist presentations.

The free speech tradition in radio pioneered by Pacifica Radio established a template for public broadcasting in the United States and elsewhere with its fund-raising marathons, premiums for those who subscribed and donated (at one point giving away FM radio sets so its productions could be heard via the then-new technology), Pacifica's fundamental steps helped form in the U.S. what would later be called public and community (as opposed to educational) broadcasting. Pacifica's influence over the development of public radio and its documentary tradition can be

measured by the fact that most of NPR's first reporters, editors, and organizers came from Pacifica staffers (Dunaway, 2005). Dunaway had grown up listening to documentaries on Pacifica's WBAI-NYC.

Over the decades this Pacifica-trained documentarian produced programmes on the Civil Rights movement, on political music from Cuba to Africa, and other topics, sometimes drawing on the work of earlier Pacifica producers from its Pacifica Program Service. From this hotbed of dissent and provocation via radio, he began writing and teaching and presenting history via radio. After consulting with UNESCO on its Programme in Intangible Cultural Heritage, he taught radio documentary production in Kenya, Colombia, England, and Denmark. Visiting Brazil for a lecture and encountering a professor in São Paulo, he sensed a kindred spirit and an interest in radio formats which were uncommon to Brazil.

Formulating a course in radio documentary for Brazil

That Brazilian professor, Eduardo Vicente of the Cinema-Television- and Radio Department of the University of São Paulo, received his doctorate in the history and recording of Brazilian music from a sociological perspective. A musician, he had many friends among the producers of key forms of his country's music traditions, including Samba, Bossa Nova, Brazilian Jazz, and other forms. He wrote the one of the first books on the record industry in Brazil. His contributions to scholarship on these topics led him to explore how radio had influenced the development and spread of these musics, writing articles and books on the confluence of music and broadcasting. He came to radio studies from a theoretical perspective as well as the medium's history and possibilities.

Developing a clearer understanding of the distinction between radio and podcasting requires an examination of the terms' definitions. Although Richard Berry defined the podcast in 2006 as 'media content automatically delivered to a subscriber via the internet' (Berry, 2006, p. 144), one can move beyond this definition to consider the social practices it entails and its production traditions. As Ignacio Gallego Pérez warned as early as 2009, 'if we are talking about podcasting as a term, what is essential is its use and the way people understand it. This usage gives rise to an increasingly nuanced definition which, in the case of podcasting, distinguishes it from broadcasting through the possibilities it offers users for selection and creation. It allows for the free generation and distribution of content and for access to a more diverse range of options, less centered on major media conglomerates' (Gallego Pérez, 2009, p. 79, our translation).

Nearly a decade later, in 2018, Eduardo Vicente would state that podcasting 'has already constituted a history and a tradition that can be revisited in order to better

understand the process that has brought this practice to its current stage of consolidated media production and consumption culture' (Vicente, 2018, p. 89).

In relation to radio, a key issue involves the discussion of alternative spaces beyond those represented by the major media conglomerates mentioned by Gallego Pérez. This includes the possibility of independent production marked by strong political engagement, such as that of the Pacifica Radio. For Brazilian students, who may lack references to the possibilities of independent radio production—or even a clear understanding of what constitutes independent radio—this alternative perspective on radio is fundamental.

So, to re-seed a documentary radio tradition in the modern podcasting era, the two professors began planning to offer Brazil's first course in radio documentary at the University of São Paulo in 2016. Though initially designed for graduate students (master's and doctoral) at the University of São Paulo, it also welcomed radio professionals, fostering dialogue with journalists and producers from local stations. Additionally, a select group of undergraduate students was given the opportunity to participate, allowing them to engage with and learn from experienced professionals. This diverse mix proved highly effective, encouraging the creation of dynamic and innovative working groups.

Pedagogical Framework: Paolo Freire and N.F.S. Gruntvig

A world-famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in the late 1950s propounded an emancipatory education model through literacy education and culture circles that cut to the heart of his country's dilemmas via 'posing problems' to challenge social inequalities (Freire, 1970). This challenged the top-down principle of organising and stimulated community groups (such as those who would form the backbone of community radio in the U.S. and Europe). Imprisoned and forced into exile in 1964 by the military coup in Brazil, Freire found a temporary home in Chile and then a global base in 1970 at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. There he published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which profoundly influenced liberatory education movements throughout the world.

Although Paulo Freire did not focus specifically on the study of radio or media in general, 'by grounding communication in dialogue and in the educator-learner relationship, he left important contributions to this field of knowledge' (Peruzzo, Bassi & Silva Jr., 2022, p. 34). In Freire's own words, his method involves establishing a dialogue that is 'the loving encounter of men who, mediated by the world, pronounce it, that is, transform it; and, in transforming it, humanize it for the humanization of all' (Freire, 1983, p. 28).

Freirean pedagogy is based on praxis, or cycles of reflection and action, where people are encouraged to engage in deep listening for core issues (or in Freire's

terms, 'generative themes') in people's lives, to engage in dialogue to construct social and political understandings of root causes of these issues, then to strategise actions, continuing with further cycles of re-listening, dialogue and actions. These 'problem-posing' cycles are for the purpose of what Freire calls 'conscientisation', or those moments and events when reflection on actions and actions on reflections promote resistance to societal oppressive and repressive structures. This process was a natural fit for fact-based documentary radio programming.

The heart of his framework is the idea that when one teaches practical skills such as literacy (or radio production), one also can deepen understandings of cultural and social histories for transformative actions. To look at a small problem is to look inductively at the larger social situation of a people.

A complementary figure to Freire is the 19th century Danish educator N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), a theologian, author, and philosopher in the Lutheran tradition of direct contact with spiritual and religious life. He encouraged adults and teenagers to engage with social issues, and his folk high schools became a mainstay of Danish life, a cross between continuing education and summer camp for building community and understanding social issues. His ideas became rooted in Denmark, underlying its practical and popular education models.

The meeting between these two instructors was fortuitous, as Dunaway had just finished teaching at several Danish universities where Grundtvig's ideas remained important; and Dr. Vicente had studied Freire at university; so in these two professor-producers, Freire met Grundtvig, yielding an approach to teaching which favoured group work in the Danish Folk High School tradition and Brazil's Freirean education for social change. Out of this collaboration came this first course in 2018, continued five times since this start.

Teaching Radio Documentary in Brazil

Freire's method was to pose problems to understand how contradictions in daily life yield social analysis. So the course began with an at-times heated discussion of contemporary issues facing Brazil: discrimination against those not from elite worlds of the great cities of Brazil, unjust law enforcement, and the corresponding need for equality and basic services for the poor.

Students sat before a large blackboard and poured out concerns. These were noted and then grouped; so that, for example, the environmental degradation of the Amazon forest was matched by prejudice against indigenous tribes, whose traditional lifestyles were under attack. A key method of Freire was to generate codifications from contradictions and encourage learners to resolve these issues through social action, in this case radio production.

In this class, the discussion began with an open-ended question in the Freirean tradition: What are Brazil's problems? This led to an extended and passionate discussion, with topics written on the classroom board. 15 emerged. They were, in no particular order: hunger, violence, machismo, inequality, racism, police violence, corruption and impunity, the situation of Brazilian Indians, fake news, political and police repression, ableism, femicide, religious fundamentalism.

Once key concerns were grouped, the three dozen participants voted on which of the 18 issues they would be willing to devote six weeks to documenting. This took place in several rounds, narrowing larger issues into ones which could be encompassed during this short but intensive 8-week period, ones about which sufficient research already existed; ones where key characters could tell compelling stories; ones where sound scenes could be recorded, ones where individual stories could be fused into a larger understanding. The final vote in the classroom was tense; this was the point where participants committed their time to discovering, recording, scripting, editing, mixing actuality and distributing the programmes. Not everyone achieved their first choices. In the end, by consensus, the professors created five production teams for five stories, mixing those with skills, experience, and equipment to match their passion.

These were then regrouped into five productions: 1) hunger, inequality, unemployment, leading to these factors seen as they affected indigenous populations; 2) fake news, religious fundamentalism, discrimination, in the form of political campaigns; 3) machismo, femicide, and violence, producing a piece on the death of a transgender politician in Rio; and 4) ableism and discrimination: the story of a local university which scheduled classes on a floor inaccessible to students in wheel chairs and 5) racism, police repression, corruption, yielding a doc on the 'Mothers of May,' a group organised in Argentina after a bloody police riot; the Brazilian case emerged in response to a wave of killings of young residents from the city's outskirts, carried out by police officers and paramilitary groups in May 2006.

The next step was for groups to brainstorm a production and sound design and to plan, schedule, and assign themselves roles for their group work: *Coordinator/Executive Producer*: keeping equipment, schedules, and personnel in check; *Sound Producers*, scouting locations for sound scenes, arranging for recordings and retakes; *Editors*, assembling and shortening the recordings and actuality into scripts; *Rapporteurs*, who kept the executive producer and teachers abreast of progress.

Before beginning, however, the student-producers needed to know sound fundamentals, how it was obtained and processed: acoustics and auditory physics; use of microphones, including their different types, patterns, placements and purposes; other equipment, including shock mounts and production kits; various

software applications for audio editing; and then practicing all of these in groups where the experienced led others.

This took two, three-hour sessions before participants prepared two key analyses alongside their schedules of recording and interviewing: A problem analysis of barriers to anticipated productions—everything from potential sickness of group members to resistance of those they were trying to document, the ‘sure we can talk to you but then they vanish’ phenomenon and possible loss of characters/interviewees who might withdraw, leaving a hole in the story. The second was a recording analysis of potential recording and editing issues: how to avoid bringing in too much ‘tape’ so that editors’ jobs were manageable; considerations of what could go wrong (and usually did) with equipment and participants.

Instructors rounded up equipment, often providing their own amidst pleas for professional care of what was lent; participated in interviews including taking sound in rough situations; advised on helped rework scripts as they developed.

From there the student-producers took charge. Working from a treatment reviewed in class for each production team, specifying interview subjects and dates and sound scenes, with equipment exchanged each class in the format of a bazaar, they began their work and discussed technical challenges. By the fourth of eight classes, they had completed a draft script for a production of 7-10 minutes each, designed to be broadcast on the campus state Radio USP, across this vast city of 22 million people. There were the usual challenges of group work, with some students working harder than others; when instructors learned of this, they held group meetings on process, in their role as managing editors. Sometimes groups asked for the participation of the professor-producers for field recordings. Student response was praxical: ‘You made us understand what we already do and why,’ said one.

One of the course’s biggest challenges is undoubtedly introducing a completely new perspective on radio production. Brazilian students are accustomed to listening to or producing talk and live radio—the latter created in the heat of the moment, often in the chaotic environment where events unfold. As a result, they struggle with the idea of taking more time to consider elements like scripting, story development, audio quality, natural sound and effects, and music. These aspects, fundamental to independent radio producers internationally, represent a groundbreaking shift in Brazilian radio thinking. Encouraging students to engage with these concepts in the Freirean tradition has become one of the course’s most significant achievements.

Monitored weekly, the programmes took shape. In the penultimate class, the students shared food and listened to the rough cuts, critiquing them before the instructors weighed in. At the end, five short pieces rich with actuality and sound occurred, which are to be folded into a set of half-hour programmes for air, with short interviews with the producers, and narration by one of the professors. Short excerpts

from several years of courses are found below, in Portuguese with content summaries, and samples from one of the instructor's own productions.

What then does one take away from this educational process? Documentaries alone cannot resolve deep social problems; though they can highlight, enlighten, and raise public discussion of issues. In the end, the instructors see themselves not as social activists provoking immediate reform, but as teachers applying a liberatory pedagogy. As a new generation of radio professionals and students learn documentary art and craft, we are opening a space for a new kind of radio in Brazil, from its only course in documentary radio. Though podcasting is alive and well and widely listened to, the format takes initiative to find; documentary radio, on the other hand, catches and surprises listeners in their kitchens, cars, and living rooms and brings creative treatment of actuality to enliven and inspire.

Audio Samples

Who's Afraid of Sex Education?

Link to audio: [https://soundcloud.com/doc-excerpts-729484905/whos-afraid-sex-education?](https://soundcloud.com/doc-excerpts-729484905/whos-afraid-sex-education?si=45fa5574cda04b558e3640bd79bc3cee&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)

si=45fa5574cda04b558e3640bd79bc3cee&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Using the case of Virgínia Ferreira—a foreign language (English) teacher at a public school who was reported by a far-right group for ‘talking about feminism in the classroom’—this documentary explores the rise of conservatism in Brazilian society. Conservative groups and politicians have introduced hundreds of bills at various levels aimed at censoring teachers in the classroom. The complaint against Virgínia was based on a recording of one of her lessons, secretly made by a student. In that class, Virgínia was explaining the meaning of the English term mansplaining. In the selected excerpt from the documentary, we hear:

Virgínia: I was summoned by the Department of Education to explain what had happened. I justified my actions and left thinking everything was settled. But then I looked at my phone and saw the message: ‘Virgínia, look at what they’re saying about you.’

Audio recording: A social media post by a far-right politician (Fernando Holiday) denouncing what he calls the ‘politicisation’ of public education, using Virgínia’s case as an example of an English language teacher allegedly ‘teaching feminism in the classroom.’ This is followed by a reenactment of some of the aggressive comments made by the politician’s followers.

Virgínia: I remember waking up in the middle of the night several times, telling myself I had to calm down, that everything would be okay, that I would get through it...

Narrator: As Christian Gonzales, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, explains, even though most of these bills are unconstitutional, they still have an impact in other ways.

Christian: They serve as a way to intimidate teachers and, in the end, they have a chilling effect on society. If educators start facing legal persecution for simply doing their jobs, they'll begin avoiding certain topics altogether.

Virgínia: At first, I felt insecure about discussing these issues. But in the end, I realised there was no way around it—I had to face the situation because my silence would affect an entire generation of students. That's when I found the courage to say: I'm moving forward.

Village vs. University – Tensions in the life of Indigenous People at Brazilian Universities

https://soundcloud.com/doc-excerpts-729484905/aldeia_universidade?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing&si=398220f56663414281887b949b1ff2a0

This documentary features testimonials from Indigenous individuals who have studied or graduated from universities in Brazil. The interviews highlight that, despite the implementation of affirmative action (quotas) in public universities, there is limited support for Indigenous students. The interviewees' perspective is that it is important to reach university and gain the legitimacy of an academic degree. This journey, however, involves overcoming prejudice, lack of understanding, and disrespect for their culture and uniqueness. The selected excerpts feature testimonials from Alecssandro da Silva and Márcia Kambéba, Indigenous individuals who graduated from universities in different regions of Brazil:

Alecssandro: Just looking at that different world made me want to go back to the village. So many people, so many cars... You come to a city where you can't practice your culture and are discriminated against.

Márcia: The prejudice comes from professors, from peers. I've experienced that... The university needs to prepare itself to welcome people with their own culture, their own 'anchors.' There needs to be an exchange of knowledge. The knowledge of the university is one, and the knowledge of the Indigenous person is another.

Alecssandro: Imagine if I took my baracané (rattle) and stayed in my house doing my ritual. People would think I'm crazy, they'd be afraid of me...

Márcia: Let the Indigenous person territorialise that space, let them play their rattle inside the university because they need to. Some time ago, an Indigenous student was at the university and went to smoke her tobacco, which came from the village, in her pipe. The university called the police because they thought she was doing drugs. It wasn't until she showed the tobacco and proved it wasn't drugs that she was able to clear the misunderstanding. But she went through a great deal of embarrassment.

Discrimination and embarrassment are things we Indigenous people face every day.

The following section features an artistic presentation by Márcia and other Indigenous people at a cultural center in São Paulo, where they discuss the erasure of Indigenous languages and memories.

Instructor documentaries, in English

Route 66: Across the Tracks

https://soundcloud.com/doc-excerpts-729484905/route66?si=4f7b3ead20794e409e9160c0a7759ba8&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

In this segment for National Public Radio's *Week-end Edition*, a producer drives by Oklahoma City and visits a cattle auction, and auditions a tune by Bob Wills; this song then introduces a history of Okies on 66, leaving their homes because of the Dust Storms of the 1930s.

Aldous Huxley's Brave New Worlds

https://soundcloud.com/doc-excerpts-729484905/aldous-huxley?si=843d1f6597f34a95bf8f71971752ea98&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

This nationally distributed documentary with music, excerpted on NPR's *All Things Considered*, explores the Hollywood period of novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley. It includes an excerpt of the NBC radio dramatisation of *Brave New World*, the first novel on human cloning, and a recreation of his well-known experiment with Mescaline.

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