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Can audio production workshops nurture diversity in an increasingly uniform audio culture? The Flux Audio workshop philosophy

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Abstract

In this interview Abigail Wincott asks Julie Shapiro to reflect on the Audio Flux workshop she led at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in March 2026 and on her approach to audio production pedagogy. Julie expresses the teaching and learning philosophy of Audio Flux and the ways she attempts to 'ride the line' between clear instruction that saves time and responds to learners' wish to learn from experts, and 'cheerleading', giving permission to experiment freely and refraining from saying how things should be done. Teaching philosophies in audio production draw on and feed into cultures of experimentation, diversity and normativity in the creative industries. Though the workshop is based in the US, Julie seeks to deliberately distance her workshops from the dominant US storytelling style and argues that the three-minute format of Audio Flux opens up possibilities of adventurous listening as well as experimental making. The audio of the conversation is also available.

Keywords

audio production, training, education, pedagogy, short form, creativity

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This is an abridged transcript of an interview with Julie Shapiro about the Audio Flux workshop she ran at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Portland, USA, in March 2026.

Julie Shapiro's career in audio programme-making includes Executive Producer and Story Editor at Canadaland (*A Field Guide to Gay Animals, The Copernic Affair, The Worst Podcast*), Vice President of Editorial at PRX and Radiotopia, Executive Producer on *Ear Hustle*, *Over the Road* and *Radiotopia Presents*). She was Executive Producer of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Creative Audio Unit (*Soundproof*, *Radiotonic*) and is the Co-founder and artistic director of the Third Coast International Audio Festival. In 2023 she co-founded Audio Flux with John DeLore. Audio Flux is an intiative to encourage the production of creative sound works by issuing a biannual call for 3-minute works on a particular theme.

This piece is part of an informal series in RadioDoc Review on training or education practices and philosophies. See also a piece by Rob Rosenthal on a workshop he ran in Slovenia, and a forthcoming article on one Chinese documentary-maker's experience of a French audio documentary workshop.

The audio of this interview is available to listen on RadioDoc Review's SoundCloud account and, very unlike Audio Flux works is risking obnoxiousness at just over 48 minutes.

AW: I saw you wrote on LinkedIn about your first ever Audio Flux workshop at the Salt Institute, and I thought it was really interesting the way that you talked about it. You said you 'kept track of how they were feeling, tracing their emotional arcs over the span of our time together'. And I wondered if you could say why.

JS: Yeah, so this was kind of a production sprint for Audio Flux. Normally we put out a call and give people six weeks to make short pieces, three-minute pieces, This was Thursday night through Sunday morning. The idea was to present what we usually do with Audio Flux, which is give people a theme and prompts and a time constraint of three minutes. Six people bravely stepped up for the challenge.

When we met on Thursday evening, we just had a listening session where everyone contributed, I called it a listening potluck, everyone contributed up to ten minutes of something to listen to. And then at the very end of that night, as we were getting to know each other, I told them what the theme for the assignment was going to be, but I didn't reveal the prompts. So we went into Thursday night sort of comfortable with each other and knowing that the theme of the assignment was going to be balance. That's sleep, dream, think about balance.

They came back Friday morning and we talked about Audio Flux for a while, and I played a bunch of fluxworks to just inspire and remind people of the range of ways you might approach storytelling. And then I revealed the prompts. And before they left to go start working on their stories, it just occurred to me to see how they were all feeling about this. I think I asked very spontaneously. I've never done that before. And then the minute I saw the list, I thought, I could really keep asking this question and see how it changes depending on where they are in the process. Because we've all been through different creative processes and they all have a sort of shape, a narrative arc to a process, I think.

So we were able to check in, I think, five times. We started Friday afternoon. Around noon, they went off into the world, having listed their emotions, and then came back at the end of the day to see how everyone was doing. Hopefully they had an idea and they were working on it. So we checked in then, and then we all hung out that night and got to know each other and worked on our stories more. I sort of joked about doing this at the bar, but we really did keep talking about all the story choices. And then Saturday morning, same thing. Okay, you kept thinking about it, you slept on it, how are you feeling today? And then they came back at the end of Saturday, and that's where you could really see the drama set in, because people were very anxious and unsure of what they had.

To me, it just mirrored all the things you go through anyway, just often it's over a much longer time when you're creating an audio story. So we had a Saturday night that felt like a little unsettled.

Then we came back together Sunday morning and they knew what they had. They were scrambling to get me the pieces because we had decided to present a public event, a dozen, 15 extra people in the room. And so we played them in front of people, which felt like the stakes were higher than just amongst ourselves. And then I, of course, had to ask at the end, how are you feeling now, now that we've come full circle from starting to having completed and shared your work? And so then I looked and I thought, this is really, it's just really interesting to see how similar, how familiar this narrative arc is.

AW: So how were they feeling at the end then after they'd shown their work to other people?

JS: Oh, I think it was everyone was just exhilarated. I kept saying ‘I'm still buzzing’. I mean, it really felt like we'd all been through something together. So you had the pride in the pieces. I think that they all learned a lot about themselves. And, you know, actually the range of experience of the producers coming into this or the students was was there was pretty wide spectrum. Two people came from

Florida who had really never done anything like an audio story, but they were curious. They really had to scramble to catch up with things that might have felt very basic for the other four students. And even someone who had a lot more experience came and said, I just work too slowly. I'm not going to be able to share three minutes with everyone. So I said, well, maybe you could share one minute, do what you want. This is really for you. And then she came back Sunday morning and said, I just had to I had to make it work. I didn't want to let everyone else down.

Something about audio pulls people into this trusting environment immediately where they could be vulnerable and they could admit they didn't know how to do things or they didn't like their ideas. We had one producer who for like 90% of the production time was going to pull a bunch of archival tape from all different sources. And then in the end, on Sunday morning, she's like, I'm just going to read a poem. And then I'm gonna sound design it when I get home. And that was fine. You bring people together in the audio space and really magical things always happen.

AW: I think you're a little bit underselling how much you had to do with that in your approach. Because it seems to me like your approach to thinking about what a workshop might do and what it is to be an audio producer, it's very human, you're really interested in the process. You're also very open-minded. I think that there are loads of spaces where actually thinking about podcasting or audio production is a lot narrower and maybe a lot more normative and maybe a lot less open to admit that we don't always know what we're doing. And the idea that people said that they felt anxious and then that they were elated afterwards, you know, I think that that's because you asked them and you made it okay to say that. And I feel that there would be quite a lot of spaces where that wouldn't be how it would be done. I'm thinking of sort of masterclasses or podcasts about podcasting or more of that industry approach.

JS: There's a lot of that out there. And, you know, I have no bones to pick with other people running things that way. But I've never thought about Audio Flux as a how to do anything. I'm not in the business of teaching people *how* to make it. We were a *why* to do it. And the why for us is built on a desire to collaborate and open up channels for creativity. And the hope is that then you have this experience and you take that back to what you do day-to-day or in your own podcasting efforts or your own production. We're more and more thinking of Audio Flux as a mindset as much as it is a podcast and a platform and a project.

I think you've just tapped into the philosophy of the whole project. Industry is gonna industry, we're just gonna be over here making cool, experimental,

expansive, fun, playful audio things. And not always just art, you know, some very important topics get brought up. We've had people get more political. So there's all kinds of ways to use that 3 minutes to do lots of things. And the hope is the more we can get out there into the community and bring new people into the community it gives permission for people to kind of expand on how they're thinking about audio production and what podcasting can be and should be. I should not say *should* be. It shouldn't be anything. It can be whatever people want it to be.

AW: I think it's interesting you use the word philosophy. That's a good word. And it seems to me that there's a tension - people talk about the creative industries and then there's always this tension then that they're industries but then they're also creative. Otherwise they're not creative industries. And those two things can often be in this really weird tension.

I've become interested in thinking about diversity in radio and podcasting. I feel sometimes we're losing some or we may never have had as much as we could have. And I might be wrong because, I mean, how do you measure diversity in audio? It's interesting to me that you're in the US and, the US has had this enormous influence through a certain sort of storytelling style on a lot of the world's podcasting. And you can easily say, oh, well, that's one thing because we can call it the US storytelling style, but there actually, there's quite a lot of variation within it and it can be really creative. So I don't want to overdo that. But I do sometimes think when I hear a podcast, well, this is a really good story, but you sound like, you know, you've got a different accent, but you sound like an American podcaster. And I do wonder, what would you sound like if you didn't sound like that? I'm interested in things that encourage diversity. So, and it's interesting to me that you're based in America and you seem to be deliberately doing things that would encourage people to come up with something that's more individual or fresh. Is that fair?

JS: I really feel like you are really understanding what Audio Flux is for. Our Circuit 7 partner is an African artist, and we're partnering with Radio Workshop, this wonderful training mentoring program in Cape Town that trains audio-curious young producers across Africa. And that was an absolute intentional thing to get out of North American headspace. We've had a great international ratio of submissions each time, but that was actually a very, intentional decision to try to promote, inspire, encourage, invite people from outside of North America to participate. And so I'm happy to say in the lead up to the deadline next Monday, right now our we're at 50-50 of US and international submissions and overall somewhere between a quarter and a third of submissions are international.

I'm always curious about what's happening elsewhere. I'm drawn to the European radio style.

Even in the fluxworks we get, I actually just made a note about someone saying that the close mic, it's very Scandinavian, it's very European, and it really sounds different than the submissions around it from Nigeria and from Ireland. You know, it's so exciting to hear. And when other people get to hear those, then they think, oh, how is this, how do I make things and what does that sound like? And even when we commissioned two producers from Africa for our previous season, they really wanted to put an African stamp on it. They wanted to share their traditions of radio making and storytelling through their piece. And so I've been thinking about that a lot and wondering how to articulate what the African podcasting style sounds like, but I can hear it.

We had one piece from Circuit 6 called Rubber Bands, and it's just a list of things that convey tension. And for a lot of people, it was the weirdest-sounding thing they'd ever heard. And in a room full of Europeans, everyone loved that one. In a room full of US producers, people were like, not sure what to do with it. Didn't *not* like it, but just it was confusing. And so I love the opportunities to really provoke a little bit.

You know, Audio Flux is not an original idea. It's something that I started at the Third Coast Festival called the Short Docs Challenge. But even that, I was inspired by a comic book artist who was inspired by Ulipo, the French literary movement or group and which is all about creativity through constraint. So there was this tradition of, you know, making rules, responding to rules, being creative. And then also through the Fluxus art movement, which is very subversive. It's right there in the title, Audio Flux. We're just carrying on a tradition that a lot of other people have done in lots and lots of other ways. And there's other audio projects that are also inviting people and giving prompts and themes. So there does seem to be a renaissance of this spirit elsewhere. It's really exciting.

AW: Yeah, that's true. It's really interesting that as in some ways diversity might be closing down, obviously people notice that and there are these movements to try and do something about it.

I want to come back to what it's like to run a workshop. A workshop is somewhere where maybe people come because they want to learn. And maybe people want to learn from other people, and specifically you, because you're a really experienced producer. I noticed that you said in your advert for it that ‘Julie Shapiro and John Delore will offer guidance and instruction, editorial feedback and sound design advice’. I think that sounds great. Some of those things are more open than others, aren't they? Like there’s *guidance* but there's

instruction, there's *feedback* - that's more just like responding. There's *advice*, that sounds not quite as instructive as instruction, but it's still getting there. So tell me something about what you were doing. What kind of balance between those things happened? How much were you telling people things? And how much were you just going, 'well, you just do whatever you want to do?' How open was it and how closed was it?

JS: These are not our stories. Producers own them. We don't own them. So they're really theirs to do what they would like with. So in terms of the workshop, I made myself available. Partly it was cheerleading and just like believing in them, helping them believe in themselves and their ideas. And partly I was like, 'too long, too long, too long'. This is how we get it down to three. I mean, there was a lot of that. And one, we didn't get down to three. And at the end of the day, we were like, Leave it at 4 minutes and 13 seconds. It's beautiful. I mean, what's the point here really? Like to like shave off the intent, the beautiful story you've made just to hit three.

So, yeah, I'm mostly a script editor, I think. So helping find voice, helping condense, helping to say more with less. Be in the room and inspiring, getting people to read things out loud so they hear where the stumbles are.

One person just needed help with miking technique. We were working very late. Saturday night, it's about 1130, maybe 1145. And they're like, 'I was just curious, where do you hold the microphone when you record?' And I was like, 'oh, well, you know, you kind of want to get pretty close'. And they're like the colour drained from their face. And they were like, 'I was just putting it down on the table in front of me, like a good three or four feet away'. And it was so late. And I was like, you could re-track and you'll hear a very, very big difference and you might like that a lot better, but you don't have to because, this is just all about learning. But they went down and re-tracked and then had a much closer-sounding narration for the next day.

But people are so resilient and the stakes were so low. Like they could do whatever they wanted.

AW: But then they didn't find it low stakes, they were anxious. So it did mean a lot to them to play in front of people.

JS: Yeah, for themselves, for themselves, not for someone else. So yeah, so the stakes are medium, I guess. Yeah, fair enough. Personally high, actually low. Maybe that's a better way to put it. And so *instruction* might have been pushing it a little.

AW: Sounds like technically there is some - you mentioned the microphone position, and this sense for what might sound better or worse. So there's technical stuff, isn't there, that people do want to learn and they do want to learn well?

JS: It's sort of like what are the words on the page and how are they sounding when you say them out loud? And what sounds written, for people who haven't recorded for audio, and just trying to keep tenses consistent. So some of it's like basic grammar, some of it's like too long to read out loud - looks fine on the page, but you can't really do that with one breath. So there were some technical things, but I think I would say most of the instruction was softer or more subjective than, this is how you do something. More like this is how you *could* do this.

It's a lot of story logic too, when they were personal stories, like trying to get from one scene to the next. We find the three minute structure is helpful for people thinking in threes. Act one, act two, act three. But you didn't have to have any structure either if you didn't want to. So I mean, some of the pieces are just sound. I listened to one last night that's just a sound composition with found trash because that's, you know, in keeping with the prompt.

AW: When I do workshops and I'm teaching people and I want to be open like that, I sometimes find it works wonderfully. I just feel like there's this real flow between you and that person. So, you may only have to ask a question like, ‘why do you think you did that like that? And what else could you have done?’ And then they start like thinking it through for you. that just feels really cool. And then there are other times where it's difficult to decide how much are people actually, kind of not going anywhere. Do they really want more structure and for you sometimes just to tell them what to do a little bit? And I feel like that's a really difficult judgment to make in the moment. Do you feel that you're trying to read them in that way and work out how much should I step back and how much should I actually step forward here?

JS: Yeah, I think especially because there was a range of experience, and so it had to be different for people in the room. But it was mostly I was there pretty passively. Like, I am here, I will listen, I will read, you can ask me questions. They asked each other a lot of questions, which was nice. So there was like sort of co-instruction in a way, and talked about decisions they'd made with other pieces and experiences they'd had.

But I think there is, yeah, there's a definitely a tension in telling versus suggesting, or in the show not tell, what can you show and what do you tell them to do for the sake of time? Like I wasn't gonna say go re-track this at midnight and I wasn't gonna say don't re-track it, don't worry about it. I said you would hear a noticeable difference. You might like it better.

AW: You mentioned trust the process earlier. I guess process was the focus of the workshops. It wasn't being told how to do things, then try them, get told if you've done well or not. But to commit to a process, and through that,

something might change, in the way that you think or make or hear things. And do you think that worked?

JS: I think what helped a lot was Friday morning, we spent about two hours going through all the circuits of Audio Flux and listening to two fluxworks from each one. And this gave me the opportunity to say, okay, here's a different set of prompts. Here's how two people approach them. Here's another set of prompts. Here's how two people approached them. That's twelve pieces, only three minutes each. So they became reference points throughout the rest of the workshop, thinking about a style, thinking about a trick or an approach or tool that you might use. I think that critical listening is as much a part of the Audio Flux process as the making the three minute pieces.

AW: So you're putting a lot of things in this workshop that encourage diversity of approach: you're stepping back a lot, which means they're teaching each other, they're finding out for themselves. And you're not the dominant voice of how things should be done in the room. And a lot of the time was spent listening. So is listening or close listening an important discipline for you in learning sound story making?

JS: The most important. I really, truly feel like you learn so much. Even these pieces I know by heart, I learn something every time someone else responds to them. So it was really important to me that we started the workshop with the potluck listening, that was really crucial for getting our ears warmed up. And then the next day we listened to mostly Fluxworks. I followed up with a long list of links.

I think that this needs to happen in person because the point is to come together. We've done online listening parties where people are commenting in the chat and that can also feel very engaging and together and revelatory and really fun. I just think people love to be in dialogue with each other. And part of the workshop experiences was like, come talk to me at any point, one-on-one. These aren't people who get to work with editors. They're often doing things on their own. Or if they are, it's for like, somebody else's vision of what something needs to sound like. So really invaluable, I think, to be able to sit down with someone and just bounce ideas.

AW: Yeah, I think when you listen together compared to when you just listen on your own, you notice so much more about the detail of it. There's this kind of weird tension in the room of like, what is this and how long is it going to take and what are we going to think about it? And I feel like that makes you notice things about it that maybe just flow over you when you listen for fun at home on headphones.

JS: We always present the circuits first in a live listening event. The real joy is in seeing the group response to moments, whether they're gasping or laughing. And if you're a producer sitting in a room and hearing people overflowing with warm laughter at a moment in your piece, there's nothing like that. I think you learn more about your own work when you're witnessing people respond to it in real time.

AW: Oh, yeah, it's completely different. Yeah. So the last thing I wanted to ask you about was the short form, because I feel like we've we've lost a lot of opportunities for short form audio, which is a bit weird because we're supposed to be an increasingly short form culture that has no attention span. And yet, podcasting, it's an immersive thing. You commit to it. They're long. And they're often serials or long series. And that's fantastic. But there was obviously for a few years Shortcuts in the UK on the BBC.

JS: Legendary.

AW: Yeah, which is legendary. And it's been cancelled. We don't really do short form audio very much. I guess our platforms don't encourage it. I used to work at the BBC and we did have short form, but we didn't call it that. We called them packages or features. A lot of people used to make them, I worked making them. So maybe three minutes, five minutes, eight minutes of a little story that goes inside another programme. And I think because of budget constraints, they don't really happen anymore. So I don't know, does that matter? What your thoughts are on the value of short form audio stories?

JS: Well, To me, there's sort of the artistic response and then the critical response looking at where the industry's gone. I always like to say publicly whenever I can, I am not anti-long form. I love long form. But the magic in the short form, at least for audio flux, is that the scale of it is manageable for people of all skill levels. Even if you've never done something, maybe this is the reason to try for the first time. Or if you're a very highly successful podcast producer - it's just 3 minutes. You know, you can sort of squeeze it in around your job.

But it's also for the listeners. We're not just encouraging producers to make things differently. We're encouraging listeners to hear things differently. And I maintain, even if you hate something, if it's 3 minutes, you'll survive. And maybe having to listen makes you rethink what you think about it in a way, instead of just bailing and moving on to the next thing. Like, why skip a three minute piece, right? Like, just listen to it.

To me, the short form is full of this potential for experiencing new things through listening, where the long form is sort of like, this is what you know, this is what you love, this is what you're going to get. Also, you just can't fit that many things

in a day. I think it's like obnoxious to hear things over like 40 minutes, I'm like, you're not respecting my time as a human on this planet.

Some part of the skill in making a fluxwork is understanding the scale of it and understanding what you can do in 3 minutes.

And we always say they're like songs. You can hear them over and over and memorize them and sing along to them a little bit. Some of the pieces by now I can and I do and I still can from 20 years ago. Short docs, challenge pieces, they just stick with me like songs do.

AW: That's really interesting. It's a different mode of listening to imagine that you would listen to it more than once because we don't really, because maybe we've come from a radio tradition, the radio is, it's broadcast and then it's gone. So it's ephemeral. We don't treat music like that: 'oh, but I've already heard that'. If you've heard it, then you want to hear it again. And that will, that's really different what you might hear in things if you've heard them more than once.

JS: Absolutely. They sound different in different rooms. They sound different because people respond differently. The chemistry in the room really impacts. The lighting in the room can impact how you hear and concentrate on the piece. So they play differently and it's just endlessly instructive to listen to them over and over.

I like to think of it as being a very generous duration, both for maker and for listener at a time when like we're just bombarded and, you know, I don't know, for myself, I'm spending so much more time with news and politics and what's going on that I literally don't have time for the longer form stuff on top of my new daily regime of trying to understand what's going on in the world. So even our podcast, we've only done one season so far, which is the First Circuit. Those episodes are all under 10 or 12 minutes. That feels blissfully short, I think, for people. And that's the point. Like, there's just a little break in your day. You can take it down while you're making lunch or whenever. And hopefully that's like an economical way to still get the creative zing, but not have to commit to something long.