

Using Immigrant Short Films in the Classroom

This guide is a work in progress. Your suggestions are encouraged: info@csfilm.org

Community Supported Film's [New Immigrant and Refugee Visions](#) (NIRV) project has trained and mentored ten recent immigrants to produce short documentary films about the immigrant experience in America, with perspectives rarely seen in mainstream media. The films are designed to stimulate dialogue among people with diverse opinions and backgrounds.

As a collection or as individual films (approximately 10 minutes each), these multi-media insights into immigrant life in America are powerful resources for motivating students and generating learning in a variety of classroom scenarios. The [NIRV Action Toolkit](#), designed for audiences of community dialogues, provides additional resources and focal points for educational investigation.

Below are **descriptions of the films and themes** they highlight, **methods for using the films and Action Toolkit in the classroom**, and **discipline-specific guidance** on leveraging the resources for specific learning outcomes.



Rafael DeLeon of the Dominican Republic sets up a shot



Still from Campaign for a New American by Qin Li of China



NIRV Filmmakers engage with community members in dialogue about immigration

NIRV Films and Themes

Stories include:

- a **Somali family divided generationally** about how to maintain traditions and embrace American culture
 - Themes: acculturation, assimilation, identity, parenting
- **Indian immigrants whose daughter is campaigning** to be the first woman of color on a city council led by white men although 38% of residents are foreign born
 - Themes: politics, democracy, acculturation
- A young **woman from the Dominican Republic with DACA status** faces potential deportation to a country she has not set foot in since she was five years old
 - Themes: undocumented immigrant policy, DACA, psychology of uncertainty
- A **Puerto Rican Afro-Caribbean musician, actor and activist** demonstrates how the Puerto Rican diaspora in Boston uses arts and culture towards relief of the political and humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico
 - Themes: cultural heritage, identity, cultural diversity, diaspora populations

New Immigrant & Refugee Visions Screen & Discuss Resources

- **A refugee from Bhutan who spent 17 years in a refugee camp** in Nepal due to persecution as a Christian, who now works to help refugees adjust to American life
 - Themes: refugee policies, freedom of religion, persecution, assimilation
- **A newly arrived Rohingya refugee from Myanmar** struggles with loneliness and homesickness as he works hard to learn the practical aspects of a new culture
 - Themes: refugee policies, freedom of religion, persecution, assimilation
- **A Haitian dancer** who teaches dance to motivate and heal community members of all ages and backgrounds and engage them in celebrating their own cultural heritage
 - Themes: cultural heritage, cultural diversity as community healing
- **Ugandan parents** of 4 young children, are compelled to work in health care, as most Ugandan immigrants in the area do, despite having no background or interest in this field
 - Themes: insular immigrant communities (pros/cons), immigrants filling economic/industry needs, American dream vs. reality, assimilation
- **An Ethiopian man** whose traditional approaches from his homeland are uplifting and integrating a struggling community in the Southern US
 - Themes: cultural diversity as healing, immigrant contributions, American dream vs. reality, immigrants filling social needs
- **A man from Haiti** who helps local Haitians with practical life issues and highlights the pros and cons of the self-supporting nature common to many immigrant communities
 - Themes: insular/supportive immigrant communities (pros/cons), identity, assimilation

Methods for Classroom Use

Community Supported Film (CSFilm) works with your library to make the NIRV film collection accessible via the library website or as electronic files for use without internet access. The license for the collection allows for individual viewing and for use in classrooms and as part of events that are open to the public for free. The [NIRV Action Toolkit](#) is available to all from the CSFilm website.

For further ideas and help planning activities, you can always contact CSFilm directly at info@csfilm.org.

Resources

- [***New Immigrant and Refugee Visions \(NIRV\): Telling Our Own Stories* film collection**](#) – The ten short (~10 minutes each) documentary films can be viewed as a whole or individually, in class or independently by students.
- [**Screen & Discuss events**](#) – A public event in your area where 2-3 films are screened followed by an open facilitated discussion with audience members, filmmakers, civic leaders and public officials.
- [**NIRV Action Toolkit**](#) – Designed as a resource for people who are motivated by the film, the Action Toolkit can be viewed on the web or downloaded as a 14-page PDF. The Action Toolkit provides details about actions you can take personally, politically, with media, and

in regards to myths and facts about immigrants, refugees and immigration. Each section includes Possible Actions, Resources, and Additional Suggestions.

Example Uses

- **Class discussion**
 - Use film(s) in class for immediate reflection on relevant issues
 - Students view films or attend Screen & Discuss event independently and discuss in class
 - Invite NIRV filmmakers or CSFilm director Michael Sheridan to participate in class
- **Assignments**
 - Compose essay in response to films/event and instructor questions
 - Select and implement an action from the Action Toolkit and write a reflection on the experience
 - Explore a resource referenced in the Action Toolkit and compose analysis according to instructor guidelines
 - Critique films or Action Toolkit according to instructor criteria
 - Before & After: In many disciplines it can be an exceptionally valuable learning experience to have students answer questions both before and after the viewing of the films to recognize how new knowledge can shift their views about a population or issue.
- **Reference**
 - Include films and/or Action Toolkit in syllabus as additional resources

Discipline-specific Guidance

The greatest value in the NIRV immigrant-produced films is in their ability to show the unique “lived reality” of immigrant life that is often under-represented in the media. CSFilm believes that in order for people from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds to make responsible and equitable decisions about their communities, they need to learn about each other’s experiences, concerns and needs.

Because the filmmakers shared language, culture, and immigrant status with their film subjects, they gained the trust of their subjects. This trust allowed for the capture behaviors, emotions, and issues that are rarely elicited by mainstream media interviewers. The value of this “insider” perspective can contribute valuable knowledge to practices in many domains and disciplines.

Political Science / Public Policy / Public Administration

Policy makers (legislators, regulators, executives: governors, mayors, city councils, town managers) and policy implementers (public administrators, law enforcement, judiciary, public staff, and other officials) have a responsibility to serve the public. Fuller understanding of the experiences, concerns and needs of all members of the public they serve contributes to improvements in the development and implementation of public policy.

See also the [Political Actions](#) section of [NIRV Action Toolkit](#).

Sample questions for discussion or written reflection:

- How do these glimpses of the immigrant experience differ from what is available through mainstream journalism and social media?
- How might these perspectives of immigrants affect choices in developing or implementing policy?
- Do the lives of these immigrants contradict any myths or facts about immigrants?
- Should policy makers and implementers be more conscious of finding ways to enable different communities to speak for themselves rather than through mainstream media?
- What challenges inhibit the ability to get more authentic understanding of immigrant contributions, needs, and concerns?
- Where do policy makers get knowledge and data to inform their decisions about policy?
- Where does the majority of your knowledge about immigrants come from?
- What responsibility do policy makers and implementers have towards immigrant populations in the US?
- What responsibility do policy makers and implementers have towards threatened populations outside the US?
- Why is the “immigrant” issue so complex? What are the conflicting priorities in American attitudes, policies and/or implementation strategies that make “immigration” such a controversial public policy issue?
- What is the role of myths, facts, and priorities in developing policy related to immigrants?

Sample issues for discussion or written reflection:

- Policies
 - Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)
 - Border Protection
 - Undocumented immigrants
 - Deportation
 - Legal immigration
 - Citizenship
 - Conflicts between local, state and national policies and implementation practices
- Affect on American Society
 - Economics
 - Security

- Public Health
 - Education
 - Culture
- In Politics/Governance
 - Foreign-born/first generation representation in government
 - Political campaigns of immigrant populations
 - Elected officials voting in opposition to the interests of the populations they represent (See [NIRV City Targeting Strategy and Dataset](#) integrating immigrant population percentages with voting behavior of elected representatives)

Communications / Journalism / Media

The general public, policy makers and policy implementers all consume information from media. Individuals choose many of their media sources, but they are also influenced by ubiquitous media (e.g., gas pumps, airports, bars). Some individuals choose additional sources (research, books, personal investigation, conversations with neighbors, co-workers, or lobbyists) to supplement their media consumption. They have varying levels of awareness of the bias of the sources they consult and exert varying amounts of effort to diversify their sources and question their interpretation of the information they consume.

People are drawn into consuming media stories based on a variety of influences including format (preferences for print, online, video, images, social media, etc.), headlines (topic or sensationalist language) or network “friend” commentary. Media culture in our advertising oriented culture is increasingly oriented around “sound-bites” and “click-bait”. The ability to understand the nuances and complexity and human experience of many issues, an understanding which is essential for communities trying to make informed and equitable choices, has become much more difficult through mainstream media alone.

See also the [Media Actions](#) section of [NIRV Action Toolkit](#).

Sample questions for discussion or written reflection:

- How do these glimpses of the immigrant experience differ from what is available through mainstream journalism and social media?
- Why are these perspectives rarely seen in mainstream media? Are they seen anywhere?
- What production techniques or styles help create these perspectives?
- Is it a conscious choice to exclude these kinds of stories or do mainstream media not have the access or trust to generate these stories?
- To the degree that it is a choice, why would they choose not to include these perspectives?
- To the degree that it is a lack of ability, how could they develop that access and trust?
- Does it matter who the producer of the story is? In what ways?
- Does it matter who the reporter, interviewer or filmmaker/videographer is? In what ways?
- What conditions would be necessary for these types of perspectives to gain a wider audience?

- What are the possibilities and obstacles for each aspect of the Community Supported Film Media Manifesto?
- Are there other ways of amplifying local voices?

Sample issues for discussion or written reflection:

- Mainstream media coverage of immigrant and other types of local communities
- Alternative/independent media options
- Local community creation of media to tell their own stories
- Social media challenges and opportunities
- Community Supported Film Media Manifesto

History

All communities and individuals have history, and much of it is documented in one way or another. Whose history gets heard? Whose history becomes known? Whose history affects current affairs? In the context of active and visible debates about immigration in America, many articles, videos and other presentations provide some coverage of immigrant history in America. It is often a history produced by people unlike the immigrants themselves. Exploring documentation of immigrant experiences created by immigrants themselves can provide unique insights and contributions to the historical record.

Sample questions for discussion or written reflection:

- How do these glimpses of the immigrant experience differ from what is available through mainstream journalism, social media, books, datasets or other sources?
- How do these films contribute to the historical record of American and of immigrants in America?
- Do these films have a greater or lesser opportunity to increase the attention paid to immigrant history than other documents? Why?
- What are the variety of significant causes and effects of the current immigrant experience, social environment and policy debate in America?
- How does the current immigrant experience compare and contrast with immigrant experiences in America in the past?
- How does understanding or misunderstanding or ignorance of immigrant history compare to the history other marginalized communities in America. What do they have in common? How are they different?

Sample issues for discussion or written reflection:

- Evolution of immigrant experience
- Causes and effects of current immigrant environment
- Diversity of sources/perspectives of immigrant history
- Observer vs. investigator vs. community member historical presentations of history

Sociology / Cultural Studies

Study and understanding of American society and its sub-cultures requires consideration of multiple aspects and sources. The NIRV films provide unique perspectives of the cultures of individual immigrants and their relationships with the larger American culture.

Sample questions for discussion or written reflection:

- How do these glimpses of the immigrant experience differ from what is available through mainstream journalism and social media?
- What transitions might immigrants experience in their sense of identity?
- How does the integration of immigrants transform American society? Or not? What factors are involved?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a culturally diverse society? For the majority populations? For the minority populations?
- Do we have a moral responsibility for refugees from life-threatening environments?
- How do immigrant populations affect the American economy?
- Are there situations where treating immigrants differently is fair? When? Under what conditions?

Sample issues for discussion or written reflection:

- Identity
- Cultural diversity
- Acculturation, Assimilation, Integration
- Resistance to Immigrants
- Moral responsibility
- Insular immigrant/ethnic communities
- Religion
- Freedom
- Persecution
- Economics / work
- Inequality

Psychology / Human Services

Behaviors and attitudes observed in the current immigration policy debate in America seem to be extreme. Root causes and effects of these extreme psychological positions provide a rich domain for investigation. Understanding the immigrant perspective through the unique access and trust of immigrant filmmakers can provide insight into immigrants themselves and a jumping off place for exploring differences in psychological drivers between immigrants and non-immigrants as well as for investigating motivators behind pro and anti-immigrant attitudes.

Sample questions for discussion or written reflection:

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- How do these glimpses of the immigrant experience differ from what is available through mainstream journalism and social media?
- In what ways might the film subjects have behaved differently if it was white American male producing the films instead of an immigrant?
- What, if anything (e.g., content, style, production conditions, length), about these films gives them the ability to increase understanding in people who are resistant to immigrants?
- What are the psychological roots of resistance to immigrants?
- How do personal priorities, including fears and values, affect attitudes towards immigrants (regardless of myths or facts)?
- What do the films reveal about the kinds of psychological issues faced by immigrants?
- In what ways are those issues similar to and different from the kinds of psychological issues that other Americans face?
- What opportunities and challenges exist in providing human services to immigrant and 2nd generation ethnic populations?

Sample issues for discussion or written reflection:

- Roots of immigrant resistance or support
- Priorities vs. facts/myths
- Identity (immigrant and non-immigrant)
- Fear, insecurity, confidence, success, hope
- Mental health issues of immigrants