

# Commonplace Exchanges: New Documentary

## Networks and International Students

by

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Commonplace Exchanges: New Documentary networks and International Students

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OCAD University

## **Abstract**

International students have to overcome language barriers, adapt to different cultures and lifestyles, and grapple with the loneliness of living far from home.

This documentary is about “typical day” of four international students living and studying in Toronto. Including on-location shots and interviews, the footage was edited into different video formats, which were combined into a nonlinear interactive user-interface. This documentary project conveys some cultural complexities involved in going abroad; the documentary profiles are imbued with affective power and contain subtle details about environmental and cultural contexts. Being built on a website this project allows the audiences to add personal experiences via comments or video-responses and become documentary subjects.

My thesis investigates how participatory online documentary can assist current/potential international students in gathering information about studying overseas. It also helps international student service professionals, including administrators at universities and study-abroad intermediaries, to better understand the unique challenges these students face.

### **KEY WORDS:**

Web-Documentary, Interactive Documentary, Participatory Media, Nonlinear Storytelling, International Student Experiences, Educational Migration.



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## **Table of Content**

### **List of Figures**

Fig. 1	The factors the respondents have concerned about studying abroad	3
Fig. 2	Shoko describes her relationship with her homestay hosts	28
Fig. 3	Shoko says a prayer in thanks for her meal	29
Fig. 4	Liza jokes about bamboo shoot while cooking with her roommates	30
Fig. 5	User Experience Mapping Framework	51
Fig. 6	First Web demo based on wix.com	51

All figures and photographs are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION &amp; OVERSEAS EXPERIENCES</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>USER PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>HYPERMEDIA APPROACH</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>RESEARCH METHODS</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>MEDIA RESEARCH-CREATION</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>USER-CENTERED DESIGN</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>DOCUMENTARY MEDIA PRODUCTION</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>FIELD RESEARCH</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>DOCUMENTARY MEDIA PRE-PRODUCTION</b>	<b>37</b>
SUBJECT SELECTION & ON-LOCATION FILMING	37
INTERVIEWING	41
<b>EDITING &amp; NONLINEAR POST-PRODUCTION</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>USER TESTING – FIRST ROUND</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>DOCUMENTARY MEDIA PRESENTATION</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>PROTOTYPING OF WEBSITE</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>USER TESTING - SECOND ROUND</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>61</b>

<b>REFLECTIONS</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>IMPLEMENTATION</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>FUTURE DIRECTIONS</b>	<b>65</b>
<b><u>REFERENCES</u></b>	<b><u>67</u></b>
<b>BOOKS</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>NEWSPAPERS, JOURNALS &amp; WEBSITES</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>69</b>
<b><u>APPENDICES A</u></b>	<b><u>70</u></b>
<b><u>APPENDICES B</u></b>	<b><u>73</u></b>

# **Introduction**

## **Background**

The thesis uses the documentary form to express what life is like as an international student in the city, in order to assist individuals who have dreams, concerns and questions about going to Toronto for further education. My target audience also includes educators and other professionals that work with international students and seek a more nuanced understanding of student expectations and needs. Taking into consideration the age range of my target audience and the necessity for a broad distribution, I utilize online platforms and interactivity.

The growth of interest in international education supports my objective of investigating the motivation and expectations of international students, to help students make informed choices about going overseas for education. The number of foreign students worldwide doubled from 1.8 million in 2000 to 3.3 million in 2008. This number is expected to grow to between 4.1 million and 6.7 million by 2020 (WES, 2010).

My thesis focuses on potential and existing international students in Toronto, and their overseas experiences including studying and

everyday life.

As the largest city in Canada, Toronto is a cosmopolitan and multicultural metropolis with a considerable population flow. It attracts international students who come to Canada from all over the globe every year both for short-term educational goals and, in some cases, to gain a foothold in Canada so that they can eventually apply for permanent resident status.

International students choose to conquer cultural and language barriers to obtain internationally recognized education abroad. It is therefore crucial for governments and universities, who are able to facilitate international students' stays here, to be aware of their expectations for studying overseas, since their choices are made at great cost facing significant barriers. Taking into account the expectations and concerns of potential international students, as well as the issues current university attendants encounter, my thesis strives to illustrate educational migrants' experiences through documentary video clips and a user-navigable interface, where potential students can obtain their own impressions and contribute their own perspectives.

In order to clarify the expectations and perspectives of international students, Noel-Levitz and CollegeWeekLive (2014) conducted a survey in 164 countries with more than 2,400 respondents at the undergraduate and graduate levels, regarding their needs, concerns and preferences.

Students expressed worries about funding, safety, and separation from family, as did parents. Language and cultural barriers were also of significant concern (see Figure 1).

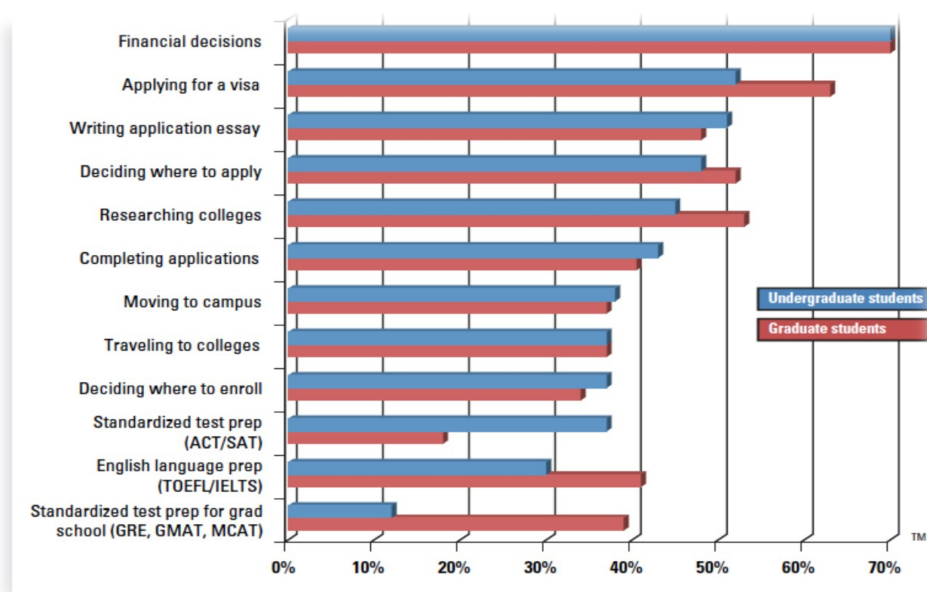


Figure 1: When asking the factors the respondents have concerned about studying abroad. Stills by the author 2015.

For students who intend to come to Toronto for education, it can be challenging to find detailed information from the official webpages of educational institutions since instructions from official sites tend to be general and sometimes promotion-oriented, avoiding critical voices. According to my research and experience, students investigate university programs abroad using three main sources: university websites, anecdotal accounts from currently enrolled international students, and international student services agencies. As such, the target audience of this thesis includes not only students and their parents, but also professionals who provide guidance services to potential and current international students, including study abroad intermediaries, training academies and universities that provide prep courses.

## **Motivation**

This thesis attempts to investigate the needs, concerns and issues of international students; and then illustrate in a form of documentary, the real experiences of students living and studying in Toronto. As an international student myself, I was in my third year studying in Toronto



when I commenced this project. Before I arrived, I researched online while preparing to go abroad, as almost every foreign student I spoke to, had done. I found that some of the online tips were helpful while several were outdated and many did not match my situation. For example, I was advised to bring an electronic dictionary. I did buy one and I've used it less than three times in two years; it is lying in my drawer right now. Interestingly, some suggestions that I made to another international student who arrived in Canada in December seem invalid already, even though it has only been two years since I came here. It is unforgettable that in the first month after I landed in Toronto, I was diagnosed with phthisis, a form of tuberculosis, during a physical examination. The day after this diagnosis, I was forbidden from visiting the university campus. I had to make an appointment with a physician and go to a clinic without knowing where to find one. Fortunately, it turned out that the examination result was influenced by a kind of vaccine, which is only used in China. I was eventually proven healthy and the school lifted the ban on my attendance. I took this experience as an example in order to say that, the existing information resources for potential international students do not capture this type

of life experience.

Students choose Canada as a destination for various reasons. There are government incentives and possible work opportunities after graduation. Education in Canada is considered a shortcut to permanent residency through “Canadian Experience Class”, which is a policy for foreign students to apply for citizenship. Other interviewees expressed that the quality of education for the price in Canada meets their expectations. As an international student, I chose to study here because I trust the learning environment in North America. Since the expenditure for an international student in the United States tends to be considerably higher than in Canada, after balancing, I picked Canada. Another common answer I got from students with study permits is that overseas study tends to broaden their perspectives, particularly in creativity, critical and theoretical thinking. This is the case for one of my documentary subjects, Shoko from Japan, who is a sophomore at York University. She pointed out that her background culture tends to be close-minded compared with Canada; thus, studying in Toronto opens up her perspective. Other students I interviewed pointed out that

overseas experiences have contributed to their abilities regarding independence including living skills and financial management.

My decision to focus my research on documentary resources including personal accounts was influenced by my own challenges. I was motivated to take advantage of my own perspective as an international student, since I have direct experience that enhances my ability to recognize the concerns and issues that international students encounter in everyday life, and then evoke these embodied experiences through camera language. As an international student myself, it is easier for me to gain access to other international students, and to represent their issues and insights regarding living in Toronto as foreign students.

Information about studying abroad, especially popular online articles, frequently mislead viewers in that this information usually consists of general descriptions or still images, without direct personal expression of the student experience. I knew I was not the only one with questions about what to expect of life in Toronto. I counted on written accounts and still images before I came to Canada. I now think the audio-visual

information contained in documentary video would be very pertinent for international students gathering information before their departure, about, for instance, what they should do and what they should know. As Michael Rabiger (2009) states in *Directing the Documentary I*, “documentary is a corner of reality seen through a temperament...it expects you to interpret life with provocative intelligence. This highlights the importance of the seers, whose mind and personality acts like a lens. It asserts the primacy of humanity, of art, and of critical intelligence by saying, ‘I am alive; see what I see!’. (p. 19)”

Documentary has the power to tell stories of the experiences of international students in Toronto that are happening now; organizing these stories into a nonlinear form allows viewers to customize their viewing experience in the process of gathering information.

### **Research Questions**

The thesis asks the research questions: what student experiences expressed through documentary is important to include for a target audience of potential students? How can user feedback from documentary interview subjects, and from those who view the

documentary online, help to enhance this open-ended online  
documentary going forward?

This documentary media project includes a nonlinear interactive user-interface. It supports affective interpretation by subjects by including a multitude of subtle details about environmental and cultural context, i.e., the qualities of accommodation, weather, transit, food and clothing.

The documentary subjects expressed that moving to a foreign country and attending school is not only about education, but more importantly, about physically inhabiting a new environment which involves embodied processes of survival (food, clothing) and nuanced, non-verbal experiences of socialization.

This documentary aspires to cross language barriers. The scenes express aspects of personalities, cultural backgrounds and social values. These subtle details are evident not only in answers to interview questions, but also in what happens in the scenes behind the speakers.

The audience can observe and speculate about details in the urban environment, such as public transportation and crowds on the street. The subjects' facial expressions and gestures reveal and sometimes remind the audience about cultural differences.

The target users are potential and current international students who are considering going abroad for education, and people who provide services to them. Professionals who provide guidance to international students can benefit from this documentary project by focusing on the concerns of students. These professionals include international student service departments at universities, not-for-credit academies and international education agencies. The support workers will be able to provide better services and guidance if they more accurately understand students' needs and concerns. Similarly, potential employers might be made aware through this project of the job seeking situations of international students in Toronto, and their eagerness to stay in the country and start a career.

This project would be distributed using online platforms. Online users

will be able to participate in this project by sharing their own insights of studying abroad. User generated content will include written comments, shared links, and a system where users can upload videos to my email account for review by me and potential inclusion in the documentary video section. In this way, I decided to name this platform "Commonplace Exchanges" in order to express my intention of providing a space for the users to exchange experiences and opinions through ordinary daily narratives, which I would like to say, commonplace.

## **Literature Review**

### **Educational Migration & Overseas Experiences**

In 2015, the Federal government of Canada announced in their "Evaluation of the International Student Program" (Govt. Canada, 2015) that "there is a continuing need to facilitate the entry of international students", as they provide "economic and social-cultural benefits to Canada." (CIC, 2015, p.11) Given relevant policies and services offered by the Canadian government, such as the PGWPP (Post-Graduate Work Permit Program) and the PNP (Provincial Nominee Program), which improve foreign students' status in Canada by providing them with opportunities for jobs and internships, educational migration is emerging as an ongoing phenomenon as evidenced by the increasing number of international students. Given the wide range of students arriving from different cultural contexts, it is crucial to promote a nuanced understanding of international students' perspectives of migration experiences.

As both an educational and economic strategy, the policy to increase



foreign student enrollment aims to enhance Canada's competitive status in the international educational market. Gunawardena and Wilson (2012) propose in the introduction of their book *International Students At University: Understanding the Student Experience* that "the research methods used to investigate student 'experiences' in universities are dominated by quantitative surveys that leave little room for exploring personal perspectives and new issues." (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2012, introduction)

In my own experience, many students who come to Canada speak English as a second or third language and commonly experience difficulties with academic writing. Even though we were accepted into graduate studies with an advanced English language skills test score, learning issues emerge as a result of different ways of thinking associated with communication style. There is a lack of support in many institutions for academic cultural adaptation and practical support with problems such as proofreading. International students accepted by Canadian universities may benefit from the Canadian education style and its open-minded learning environment, while simultaneously

receiving inadequate academic support from their host educational institutions. It is therefore important for government agencies, universities and relevant organizations to hear international students' voices and specific insights in order to be able to provide better service to them.

Adrian Furnham (1997) points out in "The Experience of Being an Overseas Student" that "the experience of studying in a foreign country leaves a powerful impression on young people that may last all their lives." (p. 14) Since international students experience similar issues in regards to adjusting to their new environments, they tend to communicate with each other and forge close friendships and relationships. Students' experiences pass through the group and influence their friends; as such, the opinions from subjects in this documentary project are of value because they are part of this process of passing on experiences to their friends and to the audience.

International students face stresses associated with settling into accommodations, choosing on- or off-campus living, learning and

becoming fluent in a new language, adapting to social customs, trying new foods and cuisines, and conquering negative feelings such as isolation and homesickness. In "Communication For Learning Across Culture", Martin Cortazzi and Lixizn Jin (1997) approach cultural difference from the angle of variations in academic culture as well as communication and learning-related factors. They suggest that academic culture and communication culture together constitute learning culture. Academic culture refers to "the systems of beliefs, expectations and cultural practices about how to perform academically" (p. 77). This is because international students are involved in a process of cultural transformation in which grammar and vocabulary are highly emphasized, and in which "other aspects of cultures of communication may be overlooked". (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997, p. 79) They provide a vivid example: "apparently simple words like 'yes' and 'no' can function quite differently in some cultures of communication." (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997, p. 79) In addition to my own experiences, I frequently witness other international students experiencing differences in communication culture. Canadian educational institutions, especially post-graduate institutions, tend to

emphasize group work and presentations which allow students who speak English as a second language to develop their confidence in interpersonal communication; this is an essential skillset for learning appropriate conduct in future professional settings. In other countries like China, the educators tend to emphasize independence in the study process. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) point out that, "a culture of learning depends on the norms, values and expectations of teachers and learners relative to classroom activity. It is not simply that overseas students encounter different ways of teaching and different expectations about learning; rather such encounters are juxtaposed with the cultures of learning they bring with them." (p. 83-84)

Consequently, international students have no choice but to experience "culture shock." Adrian Furnham (1997) explains that, "the experience of visiting or living in a new culture is an unpleasant surprise or shock, partly because it is unexpected, and partly because it may lead to a negative evaluation of one's own and/or the other culture" (p. 14). Adding to the challenges of becoming used to learning styles and communicating with colleagues and fellow students, international

students face difficulties adjusting to off-campus society. In other words, the obstacles international students encounter might impact the quality of their education even though they succeed in adapting to new academic approaches. Students also face culture shock in the context of socializing with local students and students from other cultures; this might lead to international students consciously and unconsciously forcing themselves to omit their own cultural perspective to some extent. Furnham (1997) summarizes some factors that may lead to culture shock, including: deprivation of the company of family, friends and even objects that hold significant value to the student like food and climate; a feeling of displacement, as if the student doesn't belong in their environment; a feeling of disappointment, that the host country or university does not match the student's expectations or objectives; negative life experiences such as illnesses or the loss of a job; insufficient social support in the host country, which might directly lead to unsuccessful adaptation and even stress and illness; and finally, value differences between the student's home culture and that of the host country. (p. 21-25)

Although there are a number of documentary projects on the subject of international students, they tend to be outdated or focus more on describing the general learning environment. However, I was surprised to find a documentary project called "Convenient Education" (2012) by Louis Dai, also an international student. He listened and observed Indian students' encounters around him, and eventually decided to make them the subjects of his film. The outcome is an interactive documentary about Indian students' experience of being discriminated against and attacked in Melbourne, Australia. I am also investigating difficulties faced by international students, although it seems to be a better situation here since Toronto is such a multicultural city. It is also worth pointing out that some international students may face discrimination. According to some international students, it is often subtle and tends to happen mostly in off-campus circumstances, such as accommodation seeking and job hunting.

I find my project bears some similarities to "Convenient Education", since we both use the documentary format to express overseas students' experiences. However, my project involves a broader scope, as it

focuses on a wider range of international students' daily experiences.

The four subjects differentiate from each other by first language, major, age and gender.

### **User Participation**

I chose the documentary subjects of this project because they are both common and unique. They are common in that their stories all involve overseas experiences, and they are facing common issues that many international students encounter; they are unique in that and each of them contributes different narrative and personal insights to this documentary project. In *Participatory Visual and Digital Methods*, Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper (2013) assert that participatory filmmaking can function as a research tool since it "simulates quantitative inquiry, while the film outcome or 'product' can be used in a variety of ways and venues to simulate deeper conversations." (p. 111) As Gunawardena and Wilson (2012, introduction) address above, at the beginning of this chapter, that most methodologies for investigating the experiences of international students involve quantitative surveys. Participatory documentary, therefore, offers a chance to collect and

represent through audiovisual content more detailed and more individual insights into the experiences of international students.

Documentary has been heavily influenced by new media and technology. Peter Wintonick (2013) states in "New Platforms for Docmedia: 'Varient of a Manifesto'" that "new silicon-based technology is transforming documentary expression and nonfiction media into a full spectrum of possibilities." Wintonick (2013) refers to this spectrum as "docmedia" (p. 376). Sarah Pink (2006) suggests that "Hypermedia can combine written theoretical, descriptive, pedagogical and applied anthropology narratives with reflexive audiovisual and photographic representations of knowledge and experience that can only be communicated visually." (p. 105) As an international student, I observe other foreign students through my own eyes and compare their experiences with my own. I apply this comparative lens to my documentary. My camera therefore becomes my instrument to illustrate what I observe.

More importantly, by incorporating my own perspective as an



international student into the camera, I use it as “an aspect of our collaborations and representations rather than serving primarily as a filmmaking instrument” (Pink, 2006, p. 114). This is to say, I strive to make my camera into a collaborative tool that inculcates the viewer into the experiences of both my subjects and myself.

Commonplace Exchanges is located on its own website; I intended for this website to function as a platform or network to facilitate collaboration between viewers. As such, I encourage users to participate in this project not only as viewers but also storytellers. Users will be able to share video, audio, and still images and even provide written accounts to tell their stories, thus creating a collaborative and supportive network of international students.

### **Hypermedia Approach**

In terms of the method of combining various materials generated from users, The Internet and hyperlink is clearly the most effective method to combine materials generated by users. In her book *The Future of Visual Anthropology*, when reviewing Rod Coover’s “CD-ROM Cultures in

Webs", Sarah Pink (2006) concludes, information that being collected from various aspects using different methods and cultural perspectives might difficult to adapt to "a single model of representation" (p. 107). I tend to connect this to Wintonick's "docmedia", which I understand as docmedia's emergence. I intend to employ hyperlinks as bridges in the network created by this project. As such, users can link their footage via existing video platforms. Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose (2013) point out that almost every individual today who has access to the Internet is able to create a private video channel on YouTube and Vimeo. (p. 366) This has resulted in a new form of documentary that includes user-filmed video content being linked to and generated in an integrated platform.

I have been working with a programmer on developing a mechanism for user feedback. This will include comments and reviews in the form of text as well as self-uploading through hyperlinks to this documentary project system. The users are able to link to online videos through their Youtube or Vimeo accounts.

Our connection is that processes of documentary production can change through new forms of collaboration, and that, in fact, the forms of documentary are changing through software design and interactivity, and the user experience of documentary can change through the new facility for participation offered by the online environment. (Dovey & Rose, 2013, p. 366)

The combination of hyperlinked social networks with documentary media, therefore, is a strategy I have used as a means for viewers to more freely navigate through the subjects' portraits and contribute their own personal experiences.

As such, this project as a form of nonlinear documentary is expected to express many perspectives on overseas experience through collaboration with users. According to Rombes (2009), Michael Rubin (1991) used the term "nonlinear" in the title of his book referring specifically to digital and video editing, describing "not only a technical process, but 'a way of thinking'". (Rombes, 2009, p. 73) This matters to me as a storyteller because nonlinear provides different routes of unpacking the same story. Nonlinear digital storytelling also enables the spectator to take a more active role in her personal viewing experience. Rombes (2009) asserts that, "written on the cusp of the

digital and Internet revolution, nonlinear captures the chaos of the times, between highly technical descriptions of editing processes, and larger, more global discussions of the consequences of the shift from analogue to digital" (p. 73). Within this context, nonlinear storytelling fits into the contemporary situation that includes the Internet and digital media-oriented culture.

## **Research Methods**

In this section, I examine the research methodologies I used in creating my non-linear documentary project. As filmmaking is part of the research process during documentary film creation, I include my strategies as a filmmaker as a research method.

### **Media Research-Creation**

For the documentary content I created, I did my own video recording of the international students. From behind the camera, I observed parallels between their opinions, conflicts and topics worth exploring through my lens. By doing my own camera work, I was able to have a smaller crew and more intimate interaction with the subjects, with greater control over the form and content of the camera footage. "We see what the camera sees", according to Spence and Navarro (2010), "but we also see what the camera operator wants us to see... the way the cameraperson pictures the subject helps determine how the audience perceives that subject. It also defines how much of the world the documentary may reveal, and what aspects of reality need to be

accentuated" (p. 189). As interviewer, I was able to ask common questions and respond with follow-ups based on the actual events we filmed. For the user-generated video content that viewers will upload to the site eventually, I will take on an editorial role, filtering and selecting footage to fit the form and style of the video I shot myself. Through the selection process, I will maintain a distinctive style. My research interacts with the process of creating the nonlinear documentary; by alternating between academic research and my media design practice, I employ what is called a research-creation methodology. Research-creation, according to Social Science and Humanities Research Council, is used to describe, "the creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms)." (2015)

The research-creation method fits well with my interest in observing and documenting ordinary life and reflecting on the "circuits and flows" to be found in these details. This is discussed by Kathleen Stewart (2007) in terms of "ordinary affects". (p. 2) In this project, I strive to focus on subtle details such as facial expressions and gestures. These subtle

emotional cues allow viewers to move beyond learning cursory information about studying abroad in Toronto towards a deeper emotional understanding of the experience. I would call this “affect” because essentially, the audience gathers information through paying attention to subjective and environmental details including the location, weather, speed or pace of movement, the subjects’ personal comments on the environments they live in, their facial expressions when talking, and their body movements.

In addition to the film’s affect, which can potentially help audiences better understand the experience of living abroad, the film also allows audiences to observe cultural differences from the perspectives of the subjects. In this way, this film allows audiences to understand the cultural specificities and complexities inherent in living abroad in a new way as well.

At several key moments in the film, subjects discuss how they adapted after moving to Toronto; these scenes were emotionally very powerful due to the subjects’ genuine feelings and expressions. At the time of

filming, Shoko was in her third year as a marketing major at York University. She is optimistic and open-minded; her body language and expressions reflect this. She is not outwardly anxious during the interview and speaks confidently in English, even though it is her second language and she knows that this project would be online and publicly viewable. Shoko also tends to use more obvious body language than the other subjects. She expresses herself with gestures, in particular



Figure 2: Shoko describes her relationship with her homestay hosts. Stills from video by the author, 2015.

while emphasizing her opinions. For instance, when she describes the relationship between her and her homestay hosts, she says, “actually they are like family to me, real family,” punctuated with an evocative hand gesture. (see Figure 2)



Through this gesture, the audience recognizes her embodied emotion.

During the scene when she has lunch, she asks her homestay host to



Figure 3: Shoko says a prayer in thanks for her meal. Stills from a video by the author, 2015.

cook for her, and says to him, “I want to do it in your way, not my way.” She also exhibits a culturally specific social practice when she starts her meal: she puts her palms together devoutly and says “*itadakimasu*”, which is a Japanese way to express thanks before a meal. (see Figure 3)

Another example is Liza, who lived in a town house with two roommates; they were from India and China respectively. The scenes of

them making dinner together demonstrate that they get along well with each other, especially during cooking when they have fun cooking bamboo shoots (see Figure 4), which is a typical Chinese ingredient; this is a moment of cultural exchange. This can also be observed when they make dumplings for dinner. Liza explains the techniques to make Ukrainian dumplings while her Chinese roommate makes Chinese dumplings.



Figure 4: Liza jokes about bamboo shoot while cooking with her roommates. Stills from video by the author, 2015.

Their conversation conveys the information that China, India and Ukraine have dumplings with different shapes, fillings and flavors; the

dumplings they make have a Chinese filling and Ukrainian shape. The cooking experience also signals that cultures are experiencing fusion and that overseas students make efforts to adapt to this situation in their own ways.

A moment of cultural fusion occurs when Leon uses the word “strange” to describe the social practice in Toronto of frequent apologies. Leon observed a tendency by Torontonians to use “sorry” rather frequently even though sometimes it does not connote an honest apology. Leon also admitted that he was affected by this “strange” use of “sorry” and adopted the practice to an extent; he began to apologize more after staying in Toronto for a while. This exemplifies a common process of discovering cultural difference and adopting local cultural and social practices; this is what I mean by “cultural fusion”.

### **User-Centered Design**

As a form of research, user-centered design, according to Karel Vredenburg (2002), “is a multidisciplinary design approach based on the active involvement of users to improve the understanding of user

and task requirements, and the iteration of design and evaluation. It is widely considered the key to product usefulness and usability" (p. 197). In short, this is a method which repeats the "test - refine" process in loops, based on users' feedback.

The user test for this project is expected to conduct at least two cycles. The first round of user testing was completed after the first edit of the subjects' footage; users responded to a primarily linear edit of the video clips. The second round included two user-participants, who tested the video clips in nonlinear form, as well as some development of the interface of the documentary website. I expect a third round of user testing on a finished prototype of the website. The user test includes watching the video materials, experimenting with the project and filling out a questionnaire. During some of the tests, I also conducted non-intrusive observation by sitting next to the participants and taking notes. The questionnaires were tailored to three different user groups (interview subjects, existing international students, service providers) who were asked about aspects of form and content and whether these serve their needs.

## **Participatory Approaches**

All the documentary subjects were informed about my intentions for using the material before we began filming, and all of them were then invited back to user-test the project. Through user test, I aimed to incorporate direct feedback from the documentary participants.

According to Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper (2013), participatory refers to “methodologies, approaches, or techniques that afford the ‘subject’, ‘community member’ and/or ‘field site’ greater narrative latitude when it comes to ethnographic knowledge production and a larger role in determining why and how research outcomes are produced and received by lay and academic audiences alike.” (p.16).

The project takes the form of an open-ended documentary where target audiences including potential international students can contribute their own comments or video, thus becoming active participants, contributing to the research outcomes; And its potential benefits.

User test participants were also asked to contribute their own ideas about how to present their daily experiences in ways that they considered interesting and informative. For example, the fourth subject

Leon proposed to introduce his experience through a day of walking. "This is the way of experiencing and making friends with this city," he explained, "I don't want to travel around Toronto without knowing anything on the street." Leon said that during his walks, he tends to pay attention to often overlooked objects and sights on the street, such as plants and graffiti, because "those are the small things that give character to a city and those are the small things tourists do not see."

One purpose of this thesis project is to focalize often-overlooked quotidian experiences of other cultures; as such, we decided to employ his idea and conducted a day of Leon through walking through the city. Through a participatory approach, I was also provided with new thoughts and inspirations and gained a better understanding of both my documentary participants and my audience.

## **Documentary Media Production**

I broke down the research process into two stages. The pre-production stage was field research, finding documentary subjects, choosing locations, planning and discussion. During this stage, I selected documentary subjects and talked with them to determine their interests and hopes for the film. The post-production stage included on-location filming and interviewing. The subjects knew what I intended to do with the footage because they had taken part in the planning discussion. It was critical for me to ensure that my subjects were not over-acting but playing themselves.

### **Field Research**

As I discussed in the Literature Review chapter, the field research for this documentary media project began with reflecting on my own experience as an international student living and studying in Toronto. Before I left for Canada, I searched online for other international students' experiences in Toronto, and for tips about preparing to go

abroad to study. Many of the guides and websites I took the form of lists illustrating items to bring to Canada. After living in Toronto, I now realize that the majority of goods listed on these sites are useless; I have interviewed others including classmates and friends about their experiences, and most read the same websites as I did; they described these lists as outdated. There is evidently a dearth of useful information online for potential international students, especially in the context of Toronto.

I informally conducted interviews and noted the opinions of international students about their experiences living abroad. These often differed between individuals; for example, when I asked students about their expectations about life here, some imagined Toronto to be a much larger city, others looked forward to experiencing the multicultural landscape, and still others knew nothing of Toronto or Canada prior to their arrival. This reflects a situation in which students came here for educational purposes with different and often inaccurate preconceptions. Those who attempted to learn more about life here as an international student found little useful, up-to-date information.



With this in mind, I explored videos on YouTube for material related to student experiences. Those videos I found took one of two directions: those produced by amateur filmmakers that focus on one aspect of international life (for example, food); or advertising videos produced by professionals working for universities or colleges. Several productions titled “a day in the life of...”, focused mainly on YouTube celebrities and bloggers detailing a “typical” day in their unusual lives. Given what little information is available in any medium online about international student experience, I began considering making a film about this group to serve as reference and guide, and to encourage and facilitate a community for sharing experiences through integrated hypermedia.

### **Documentary Media Pre-Production**

#### **Subject Selection & On-Location Filming**

I found each of my four subjects for this project in different ways. I have known Wanli, a Chinese female student, since I came to Toronto three years ago. I considered her an ideal choice: she is articulate,

eloquent, and unafraid of the camera. At the time of pre-production she was struggling with apartment hunting, which I considered a pertinent topic to the film, because accommodation is the first stage of settling down in a new environment and housing issues are common among international students. During the time of shooting, Wanli had just completed her studies and was trying to get a job in Toronto, but before that, she needed a place to settle down. We conducted filming in August 2015; I followed her for one day as she met with a real estate agent and landlords. Settings where I filmed Wanli include on streets, on public transportation, and in different apartment buildings.

The second subject, Shoko, is a Japanese sophomore studying at York University. She got to know about my project through mutual friends and contacted me expressing in participating as a subject. She is open-minded optimistic and sociable. I chose Shoko as one of my subjects because I found it interesting that she tended to make friends with mostly Chinese students; she even attended a Chinese language class. She explained that Japanese students were rare in Toronto; she found she was more comfortable with Chinese students because the two

cultures have many commonalities. We decided to film an ordinary weekend for her; however, here ordinary does not stand for meaningless; as Birchall (2008) states, "documentary always offered one of its fundamental aspects, a way to see into the ordinary lives of other people" (p. 281). Shoko's weekend resembles that of many other international students' living off-campus. Homestays are a common form of accommodation for international students; Shoko's story provides insight about typical homestay arrangements. Her weekend includes cooking, hanging out with her homestay hosts, and working on a class assignment, meeting with friends and working as a part-time model.

The third subject is Liza, a Ukrainian student who came to Toronto for her Master's degree in applied mathematics. I found in my interviews that many students hoping to study abroad tended to struggle with the University application process. A Professor of mine recommended Liza, who was in the process of applying to graduate programs at Canadian Universities. Liza completed her Bachelor's degree in Taiwan, so she experienced living far from home prior to entering graduate studies.

She is enrolled in a pre-graduate preparation program at York University; I filmed her studying and completing university applications. She spoke about the benefits for her of a pre-graduate preparation program, and how after experiencing cultural and language barriers in Taiwan, she chose to continue her studies in an English-speaking country.

Leon was the final subject I found. Unlike the others, he was working in his home country of India when he decided to go abroad as a student; he wanted to gain more life experience and knowledge before settling down to work for others. Leon is a first year student in the Digital Futures program at OCAD University. He meticulously plans his schedules, and leaves one day per week to walk random routes through the city; he described this as an effective way to explore Toronto as a newcomer. He said, "I don't want to live in this city like a tourist. I walk through the city so I can discover every corner in the street." In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes the affective powers of the ordinary, saying, "They are circuits and flows that form of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock,

as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation.” (p. 2) I found Leon’s city walking similar to the “ordinary affects” Stewart outlines. Any object or encounter on the street might profoundly affect him. Leon’s exploration lasted for more than six months and he described this walking as not just simply moving along the road, but a process of learning and experiencing. Leon explained that he sometimes jogs instead of walking because he finds it relaxing to immerse himself in music and run through blocks, crowds and parks. Considering the difficulty associated with shooting him running, we decided to walk. The shooting day turned out to be a long journey following him and capturing things that drew his attention.

### Interviewing

Above are introductions of the four subjects I filmed for Commonplace Exchanges and descriptions of the aspects of each subject’s daily experience that I recorded. Apart from following shooting, I conducted interviews with them. I posed questions in connection to each individual’s experience on the shooting days, and some common

questions like why they chose to study in Toronto.

I interviewed Wanli about her plans for potential careers and her opinions about staying in Canada. As I asked her questions about living in such a multinational and multicultural city, I realized that I should pose this question to all the subjects; as international students bringing their cultures to Toronto, they have unique perspectives of Toronto's multicultural landscape. Other questions I asked them all included "What do you think about Toronto?" and "What are your future plans for staying in Canada?" Wanli pointed out some common situations faced by international students in regards to accommodation. She noted that it is difficult for international students to find reasonably priced accommodations, prepaid deposits can be prohibitively expensive.

I asked Shoko about her typical weekend, her studies, and the experience of staying with locals in a homestay. I also interviewed her how she imagined Toronto before arriving, and how Toronto compares with Japan. I also interviewed her homestay hosts about their

perspectives and experiences spending time with foreign students. From them I got valuable information about local perspectives on international students as well as about the responsibilities and duties of homestay hosts.

Liza's interview began with her experiences studying in two different cultures – Taiwan and Canada. She said that after studying in Taiwan, she realized that she wanted to go to graduate school in an English-speaking country because of cultural and language barriers. I also asked questions regarding her expectations for her pre-graduate preparation program. Was it successful in preparing her for graduate school? She explained the process of applying for universities, including required documents and how to write them appropriately.

Leon had a unique perspective on international studies that emerged during our interview. Leon and I shared the same study lounge at school so he has seen my work in progress presentations. He predicted my questions and often answered several questions at a time with long and detailed explanations. Surprisingly, when asked about his critical

thoughts of Toronto, he provided a simple answer – nothing. He explained that he always pushes himself to adapt to new environments instead of expecting the situation to change for him. His interview focused on how problems can also become opportunities in a new situation. Based on his experience in New Delhi, India Leon expressed the view that Torontonians are “too polite”. Leon focuses on the strengths and resilience that students bring when they come here to study and expresses a sense of confidence. This perspective also can help foreign students to adjust to their new environments more easily.

### **Editing & Nonlinear Post-Production**

This stage involved editing and arranging the clips in a nonlinear fashion. I began the first round of user testing during this post-production stage. The post-production of this project involved two methods of editing. First, I edited footage of each subject into ten-minute long clips chronologically depicting their daily experiences. I decided to add English subtitles to ensure that audiences could understand the subjects, who sometimes experienced language issues during the interview process. Considering that this project’s target audience also includes



parents of current and potential international students, I asked the subjects to translate the English subtitles into their first languages as well. In order to emphasize the temporality of the students' daily experiences, I included time displays, which appear on the screen at certain intervals.

After I edited the first three subjects, I arranged them into a web page with brief descriptions, where audiences can select which video to watch. The first round of user testing was based on this simple interface. The questionnaires focused on the relevance of the video content.

## **User Testing – First Round**

The first round of user testing was done with fellow students from OCAD University after finishing initial editing of the documentary clips. By “initial editing” I mean that all the footage of the subjects was trimmed, sorted and organized chronologically. This first edit was done with time displays, English subtitles and additional text interpretation when needed. The testers included four international students from China, Saudi Arabia, Britain and India. Two of them conducted the test individually while the other two completed it together. Users were first asked to watch the full-length edited documentary video of each subject, and were then asked to comment on the video they watched. The testers provided the following feedback:

### **User Test Participant #1**

This participant was asked to test the documentary video of Wanli’s apartment hunting experience. He noted that the story flow is engaging and that the commentary by this subject effectively provides supplementary information to the footage. He also liked the idea of including additional details of the rental properties Wanli visits; these

details provide specific information that informs audiences about the conditions of accommodation and costs of living.

This participant agreed with the idea of providing subtitles with different languages, but suggested that subtitles be selectable. Also, the subtitles were white, which made them difficult to read sometimes when the background video was in a lighter color. For this version, I embedded the videos in a template that included advertising. The user commented that these advertisements in the video player impeded the user experience and detracted from the documentary project aesthetically and ideologically.

#### User Test Participant #2

Participant #2 watched the same video as the first participant. She commented that some of the jump cuts were too abrupt and several audio cuts were poorly connected. These incoherent cuts might disturb the flow of the film. Another issue she addressed was that the background music makes it difficult to hear the subjects' voices. She also mentioned that it was hard for her to concentrate on a 9-minute-long

segment in which many shots were of the subject walking; for her, these walking segments did not feel meaningful. Similar to the first participant, she noticed that the color of the subtitles made them difficult to read sometimes, and more importantly, the subtitles included some grammatical mistakes and incomplete sentences, which detracted from her viewing experience.

#### User Test Participants #3 & 4

These two participants watched the clip of Shoko's typical weekend. They felt that this daily experience reflected their own situations - weekends could be either relaxing or busy depending mostly on their class schedules. It is worth mentioning that both expressed being emotionally affected by this interview; the subject used gestures often, and the viewers felt strong emotion when observing her embodied gestural expressions. This feedback reinforced my intention to build emotional cues through capturing subjects' embodied experiences. However, they suggested that the video was a little too long; they considered some of the shots unnecessary.

Based on the suggestions those participants feedback on experiences being far from home, I made significant adjustments to the video clips. For example, I removed the background music which testers found annoying, replacing it with original sound design I commissioned by Stephen Keller.

## **Documentary Media Presentation**

After making adjustments in response to user feedback, I adapted the interface so that audiences could navigate and select clips. I decided to split the initial edits into clips, which are more suitable for a non-linear storytelling format. I organized these by theme so users can search for clips that match their areas of interest. I attempted to develop this project as an integrated hypermedia platform while maintaining the potential of the documentary form to convey information and emotional nuance. By selecting clips in different orders, audiences are given the opportunity to create personal editions of the documentary. I hoped that nonlinear digital storytelling would bring the spectator from

passively viewing to a more active role by tailoring their personal viewing experiences to their specific preferences.

The themes I used to organize the clips include:

- **Accommodation;**
- **Schooling;**
- **Food;**
- **Time Away from School;**
- **Staying in Canada**, which covers the subjects' choices about whether to stay in Canada, and their future plans if they choose to stay;
- **Toronto: Image**, which includes subjects' opinions on the city, whether they like it and why; and
- **Toronto: Diversity**, which includes subjects' experiences of Toronto's racial and cultural diversity.

### **Prototyping of Website**

I began with a paper prototype in which I mapped out the framework of the project interface (Figure 5).

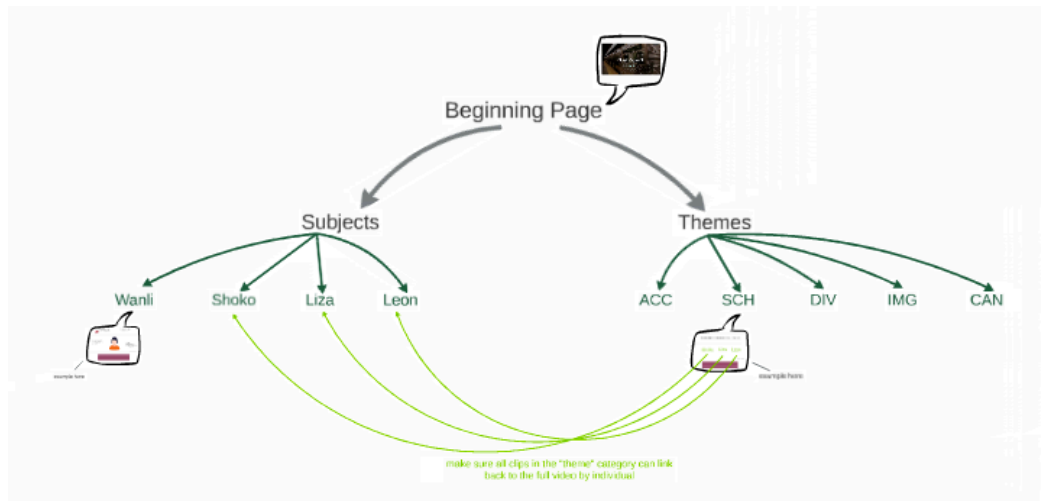


Figure 5: User Experience Mapping Framework.



Figure 6: First Web demo based on wix.com, Stills by the author, February, 2016  
(<http://jiyushan26.wix.com/overseastudent>)

After paper prototyping, the first web demo (see Figure 6) was completed on the web-building site wix.com using a pre-made template; this was used to conduct the first round of user testing. This demo is

functionally very simple, with hyperlinks that users can follow to related videos. The user can choose to browse clips based on either subject or theme; this will take them to a secondary menu in which they can select clips. After finishing a clip, the user can directly select other clips by related themes or clips that cover the same subject. Alternatively, they can return to the previous menu and select other clips, or return to the top menu. By navigating clips in any order, users can compare different opinions or feelings between the four subjects and make their own personal and critical judgments on those opinions.

This first web prototype had both positive aspects and several issues to be addressed. Using a template allowed me to avoid coding, which saved time and money. The template was also very flexible, allowing me to make a simple entry page using the page template provided for background video clips and typeface, which is easier to code than an entry page made from scratch. In this way, the template is a cost-efficient and convenient method to sketch out a framework for non-linear storytelling. However, the template has severe limitations for gathering resources from viewers. The website I am using does not



allow for participatory actions by users, such as uploading videos and leaving comments and reviews. Additionally, the design templates were basic and conventional so as to cater the widest range of user demands. The customization and interfacing options are very limited. While the template provides a convenient layout, it is not possible to build a website with its own creative look and style.

Based on user testing, my objective in the next steps of developing this interactive online project was to create a platform for an open-form documentary where users could interact with each other and upload comments and video content, based on my editorial review and decisions. Since this was beyond my own expertise, I approached a collaborator who is also a student specializing in programming. We added more features so the original website to facilitate user participation and foster networking between international students. This new website was constructed on the OCAD U students' online database using HTML. The comment function was added through WordPress, so a comment section can appear under every video in this system. The users are allowed to contribute their stories through hyperlinks and email. I

will be responsible for filtering and uploading the received video and media content.

### **User testing - Second Round**

Based on the progress we made, I conducted the second round of user tests. This user testing session involved the same testing approaches as the first testing cycle, but with the added intention of testing the usability and functionality of the web platform in addition to the feedback on the film content. The usability testing included user feedback on the use of hyperlinks and transitional animations such as pop-up effects when cursors move over a certain location. Participants were also asked to provide suggestions for the web platform, especially in regards to the participatory elements of the site.

Two participants took part in this testing session. They each spent 60 minutes experiencing the website and filling out questionnaires. They were provided with the mockup of the website with full basic functionality.

### User Test Participant #1

This testing participant evaluated the believability and diversity of experiences expressed in the video. She was also asked to evaluate the overall usability of the web system in terms of its appearance, transparency and consistency.

This participant noted that the clips feel believable and relatable, as the content describes the daily activities that are shared by most international students. The filming and storytelling techniques also contributed to a sense of believability in the clips. However, she suggested that the focus on quotidian experience is somewhat limiting to the scope of the project; other issues such as personal relationships, environmental changes and work- or study-relevant issues should also be discussed. The participant suggested that the content was mostly positive in nature, and that the clips should also take into consideration the negative aspects and difficulties of being an international student. Thus, the tester felt that there wasn't enough diversity of experiences. This is vital to me—given that this project is intended to be widely viewed, the documentary subjects tended to be unwilling to express negative

comments and feelings. Since it was not possible to interview the subjects anonymously, it is important to come up with solutions to differentiate my project from other official online information.

The participant felt that the web platform was overall user-friendly, and was appreciated that the user interface was clear and coherent. On a scale of one to five, one being the least user-friendly and coherent and five being the most, the participant valued the coherence of the overall user interface at a four. The participant especially favored the design of the entry page. However, she stated that the typeface choice of the system might be difficult to read.

She indicated that the navigation system was appropriate but involved unnecessary layers that might confuse the audience. The functionalities were sufficient enough for users to navigate through the system.

However, she did raise concerns for the video uploading function; as the target audience may not be professional filmmakers, the quality of their videos might potentially detract from the user experience. Finally, she noted some minor difficulties in accessing the content on the site.

## User Test Participant #2

The second test participant examined the web platform in the same manner as the first. He also confirmed the believability of the content and described it as interesting to follow. However, he suggested that the content footage only documented one day of the filming subject, which he felt incomplete; this participant suggested that it might be useful to conduct a follow-up. He questioned the diversity of the content, and expressed concerns about the quantity of subject matter was inadequate and that the themes discussed by the subjects was somewhat narrow. He also stated that the project focused too much the experiences of Asian international students, and did not provide enough useful information for students from other ethnic groups. This participant noted that the subjects are all in school or have just graduated; he suggested that maybe those who already graduated and worked for a while in Canada should also be included; this, he posited, could better express the living and working conditions of foreigners in Canada.

Regarding the usability of the platform, the participant confirmed that the overall appearance of the web platform is coherent and

aesthetically pleasing. There is no lack of functionality in the system.

However, the tester questioned the format of the website. He claimed that it is very similar to existing social media, and that this simply provided a channel for users to share their videos; he didn't think it enhanced the quality of storytelling. The navigation is fluid but unnecessarily indirect, he thought should be removed.

From the second round of user testing I received more critical insights for the interactivity of this platform; for example, the lack of dynamic approaches in user experience. I consider this an important future direction for this project; currently, I am in the process of working on the third prototype based on the feedback I received in this round of tests.

After the second round of user testing, I considered user feedback and made adjustments: to paint a more nuanced picture of overseas life experience, I added an interview with Shoko's homestay hosts Benedict and Robert. This couple provided valuable information in regards to students' accommodation in Toronto from the perspective of the host. I decided to link their video to Shoko's portrait as a suggestion if the

audience is interested in accommodation-related information.

The website is coded in HTML and JavaScript. I reduced the number of buttons users may encounter so as to create a neat and straightforward interface. At the starting page there are two buttons that stand for “choose by subject” and “choose by theme”, functioning as nonlinear watching method. There is a commenting window underneath each video clip, through which the viewer can type in text-based content. This website also supports upload video/image content in two ways: firstly, viewers may email audio or video content to me to be added to the page; secondly, users are encouraged to comment with links to their own media productions. I will select and filter the received and linked media content.

For users who intend to participate in this documentary but lack experience or technical skills for recording video, I provide brief instructions to help them get started. I also provide a list of cameras that can be used as to record video, including not only video cameras but also cameras built into smart phones, tablets and laptops. I emphasize

that shooting video requires certain technical skills but that as an administrator, I prioritize stories much more than stylistic elements.

The website includes a user agreement that states that by submitting content, the user-participant automatically allows the website to use and distribute their likeness, voice and other information included in the uploaded video. On the other hand, the user participant is responsible for any copyright issues if they include other people's work without permission. The website also indicates clearly that it functions as an online platform for international students to exchange information and experiences, and is not intended for commercial usage in any form.



## **Conclusion**

### **Reflections**

Commonplace Exchanges began with an investigation of nonlinear documentary video as a platform for addressing the experiences and obstacles encountered by current international students in connection with their overseas experience. As I observed while creating this thesis project, international students still face obstacles living in Toronto as foreigners. In March 8th, 2016, the Canadian government announced that they are planning to welcome over 300 000 new permanent residents in the year 2016 (Zilio, 2016). This might lead more educational migrants to consider Canada as an ideal destination. This thesis attempts to address the concerns of potential and existing international students; the issues highlighted in this project may help universities and governments to offer more assistance and supplies for these students, who are isolated from their families and support systems.

The primary intention of this piece is to assist potential and current international students to realize that studying in a foreign country

presents unique and difficult challenges involving acclimating to a new environment and dealing with logistical problems like finding accommodation and a job. There are several obstacles that cause problems for international students, including physical difficulties such as changes in cuisine and weather but also emotional issues like isolation, homesickness and culture shock. However, this documentary project also emphasizes the adaptations made by current international students: students adjust themselves to new environments by building friendships and social networks and by acclimating to the host country's cuisine.

Commonplace Exchanges also expresses several approaches to this adaptation process; understanding these different approaches is useful for current and potential international students. International students are necessarily independent; they are adults living far away from family support; however, social support and friendship are also integral to having a positive international experience; in this project, engaging with others serves as the major solution to loneliness. This project asserts that international students who want to have a positive and fulfilling overseas experience should try to be adaptable, to engage in critical

thinking and to maintain a positive attitude when facing cultural and financial challenges.

Another aspect of this project that came to light upon reflection is that it is important to understand the stories being told by the subjects in order to properly convey those stories in the documentary form; for this project, it proved effective to engage the subjects in a participatory process that allowed them to shape the direction of my questions and of the film more generally. As a director, I benefitted considerably from my experiences as an international student; I was able to understand and contribute my own thoughts to the stories, and those thoughts are revealed throughout the whole process of producing, including subject selection, interview questions raising and post-production editing.

In terms of the final presentation, I would have preferred to leave myself more time for user testing and refining the website. As I am not an expert of web building, this work was accomplished in collaboration with fellow classmates. I feel that the website could have been more developed if I had entered the web design stage earlier, and with more

understanding of and preparation for the technical difficulties inherent in the design process.

Additionally, the website in its current form might face some difficulty distinguishing itself from existing social media sites such as Facebook and video platforms like Vimeo. The designed functions of Commonplace Exchanges emphasize multimedia content sharing among users, which could be achieved through Vimeo. On the other hand, this website also creates an opportunity for international students to create their own online communities and social networks without the corporate interferences, such as advertisements, present on existing websites.

## **Implementation**

This thesis outlined the potential of hypermedia documentary as a media form to express the experiences of those studying overseas through telling stories about international students' daily experiences. I identified value in the affective qualities of the video medium combined with user agency over storytelling features. I demonstrated these findings through

the creation of a website that situated my documentary within a potential network of user participation and customized navigation. This project has implications for students who view it online and learn about studying abroad from it; it also has implications for professionals who work with international students, who may use it as a reference to gain a deeper understanding of international students' experiences and feelings.

By using this hypermedia documentary, users can become emotionally involved in the documentary subjects' experience and imagine their own experiences in that environment, and then compare the subjects' experiences to their own objectives and expectations, so as to make more informed decisions about studying abroad. I hope that this project will function as a network through which international students can communicate, share their own stories and provide insights to potential international students.

## **Future Directions**

Commonplace Exchanges was created to bridge target users using an interactive storytelling process. It is my intention at this stage is to continue the construction of this platform and to collect more stories from others.

I plan to explore the possibilities of utilizing new developments in digital film and online network design, for which I must become more knowledgeable in web building and coding. Ultimately, I plan to continue to focus on the cultural complexity that international students encounter, and take further steps to develop the Commonplace Exchanges project.

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## **Appendices A**

### **Documentary Release Form Templates**

## PERSONAL RELEASE FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN A DOCUMENTARY

To: YUSHAN JI as producer of this documentary

1. For valuable consideration received, the receipt and sufficiency of which is hereby acknowledged, I, hereby irrevocably grant to Yushan Ji, as evidenced by my signature on this release, the unrestricted absolute, perpetual, worldwide the following rights (in the documentary film she is making) to:

(a) Use and permit to be used my name, likeness, image, voice, biography, photographs and recordings of me in all languages and all forms of media now known, whether in original or modified form, in connection with the project, as Yushan Ji as producer may choose, and

(b) Reproduce, copy, modify, create derivatives in whole or in part, or otherwise use the Pictures or any part thereof in combination with or as a composite of other matter, including, but not limited to, text, data, images, photographs, illustrations, animation and graphics, video or audio segments of any nature, in any media or embodiment, now known or hereafter to become known, including, but not limited to, all formats of computer readable electronic magnetic, digital laser, Internet and other interactive media products for any purpose whatsoever, and

(c) Display, perform, exhibit, distribute, transmit and, freely use, adapt, edit the works (including my name, likeness, image, voice, biography, photographs and recordings of me in all languages and all forms of media now known), and any information, material, scenes and/or situations contained in it and/or furnished by me, in and by any means now known or hereafter to become known.

2. I waive and relinquish all rights and remedies at law or in equity, including moral rights, and release and forever discharge you and all others dealing with you from, and agree not to sue you or any of them, with respect to any claim, cause of action, liability, loss or damage of any nature whatsoever arising out of your exercise of the rights granted herein, including claims relating to defamation or invasion of any right of copyright, privacy, personality or publicity.

3. I agree that there shall be no obligation to utilize the authorization granted by me hereunder. The terms of this authorization shall commence on the date hereof and be without limitation.

4. I warrant and represent that I am \_\_\_\_\_ (insert "under" or "over") the age of 18 years and that I am free to enter into this agreement.

I have read and understand this Release prior to signing and I am fully familiar with all terms herein and I warrant and represent that I have the full right, authority and capacity to sign this Release and grant the rights granted herein.

This Release shall be governed by the laws of the province of Ontario and the country of Canada.

Name (Print): \_\_\_\_\_ Witness Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_, 201\_\_

LOCATION RELEASE FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN A DOCUMENTARY

You ("The Producer") have advised the undersigned that are producing a non-commercial documentary tentatively entitled Commomplace Exchanges (the "Picture"). You and the undersigned hereby agree as follows:

1. The undersigned hereby and irrevocably grants you:

a. The right to enter and remain upon the property, which shall include not only real property but any fixtures, equipment or other personal property thereat or thereon, located at \_\_\_\_\_ (the "Property"), with personnel and equipment (including without limitations, props, temporary sets, lighting equipment and cameras) for the purpose of photographing scenes and making recordings of said Property in connection with the production of the Picture on the following date(s): Shoot: \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_; Strike: \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.

b. The right to take motion pictures, videotapes, still photographs and/or sound recordings on any and all of the Property and all names associated therewith or which appear in, on, or about the Property.

c. All rights of every nature whatsoever in and to all films and photographs taken and recordings made hereunder, including without limitation all copyrights therein and renewals and extensions thereof, and the exclusive right to reproduce, exhibit, distribute, and otherwise exploit in perpetuity throughout the world such films, photographs and recordings in any and all media whether now known or hereafter devised, including without limitation in and in connection with the Picture.

2. You agree to indemnify and to hold the undersigned harmless and against all liability or loss which the undersigned may suffer or incur by reason of any injury to or death of any person or damage to any property (ordinary wear and tear excepted), directly caused by any of your agents or employees when present on the Property or by reason of the use of any of your agents or employees or any equipment brought by them on to the property.

3. The undersigned warrants and represents, that the undersigned has the full right and authority to enter into this agreement and grant the rights herein granted, and that the consent or permission of no other person, firm, or entity is necessary in order to enable you to exercise or enjoy the rights herein granted.

4. The undersigned hereby releases you from, and covenants not to sue you for, any claim or cause of action, whether known or unknown, for defamation, invasion of privacy, right of publicity or any similar matter, or any other claim or cause of action, based upon or relating to the exercise of any of the rights referred to in Paragraph 1 hereof; provided, however, that the foregoing shall not affect your obligations to indemnify the undersigned pursuant to Paragraph 2 hereof.

5. The undersigned further warrants neither he/she or anyone acting for him/her, gave or agreed to give anything of value, except for use of the Property, to anyone at \_\_\_\_\_ or associated with the production for using the Property as a shooting location.

6. This agreement shall insure to benefit of and shall be binding upon Yushan Ji and personal representatives. You shall not be obligated actually to exercise any of the rights granted to you hereunder; it being understood that your obligations shall be fully satisfied hereunder by payment of the compensation referred to above. The agreement constitutes the entire agreement between the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof and cannot be amended except by a written instrument signed by the parties.

ACCEPTED & AGREED TO:

\_\_\_\_\_

By Very truly yours,

\_\_\_\_\_

(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Please print name )

\_\_\_\_\_

(Title)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Phone Number)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Email Address)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Address)

## **Appendices B**

### **Questionnaires**

USER TESTING QUESTIONNAIRE  
FOR GROUP A

Documentary  
Subjects

Dear Participant,

Before leaving today, please fill out this questionnaire by answering the questions. Please note the only way you can be identified through this questionnaire is the email address you provide. If you don't have time to stay and complete the questionnaire, please take it with you, complete it, and return it by sending a photocopy to [yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca](mailto:yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca) from the email address you provided.

Thank you for generously volunteering your time to participate in this user testing. Your input will be invaluable in the development of my thesis project. I hope that you find it to be an interesting and enjoyable experience!

PLEASE PROVIDE YOUR ANSWERS IN DETAILED SENTENCES.

Your email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Learnability

1. Do you feel that you successfully experienced the entire system?

Yes. It is kind of easy to experience the whole system. It would be better when adding some connection button between web pages.

2. Do you think the controllers are well-organized? Are the functions easy to find?

Yes. It is easy to follow the functions provided by the system.

3. Did you immediately understand the function of each item?  
However, as the increasing themes, it would be better to add search & catalogue at the top or somewhere.

At the first page, I am not so sure what to do. Just browsed the page and found the selecting button at the end.

4. Are all the functions you expect to find on an interface present? If not, what functions do

you think are missing? What would you add?

① I would add a top button at the end of web page in order to go to the top of the webpage immediately. ② I may list all functions / catalogue at the top of pages, so

5. In the Scale of 1 - 5. Please RATE the following questions (5 = Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3 = Good, 2 = Poor, 1 = Very Poor)

5.1 How do you rate the functionality of the project system in terms of performance?

4

5.2 How do you rate the graphical user interface design of this system?

4

5.3 How do you rate the system in terms of user-friendliness?

4

5.4 How do you rate the operational performance of this system?

4

don't need to  
browse to the  
end to  
select a  
function

### Terminology and system information

---

6. Do you think the terminology was clear and precise?

Yes. It is clear to understand the main ideas of the system. It would be better to add some key words or sentences beside each video in order to get a sense of key information in the video.

7. Did you feel confused when learning to operate the system?

Overall, it is easy to operate system. Just need some buttons in order to transfer between different webpages easily and quickly.

8. Is the theme of the system consistent? If not, please discuss.

Yes. It would provide useful information for new immigrants.

9. Did you encounter any difficulty while using the system? If so, please indicate.

- ① The button to go back to last page / other pages
- ② The button to go to the top of the page.
- ③ Top text includes the themes of the system

### Concept

---

10. Do you understand the concept of the system?

Yes.

11. Do you think that this system is providing valuable information?

Yes, it would provide great useful information as the increasing subjects & themes.

12. Has the system satisfied you as a documentary film?

Yes. I can get a close view of the various people and their lives and challenges in Toronto.

13. Has the system satisfied your academic requirements as a media project?

It's a great system that can provide great help to new immigrant. However, the information is relatively limited and scarce. I believe as the participants and database increasing, it would be much more helpful.

As participants in the documentary film,

14. Do you think anything important is missing?

How can more participants get involved in the system. What would be their passion to show the opinion or experience in the system. It would be a main issue to the development of system.

15. Does your edited portrait portray the issues and experiences you spoke about accurately?

Yes, my issues and experiences were clearly shown in the system. With different theme, it would be better for user to look for particular theme.

16. What do you like best/least?

The best: I like the way to show the information. It is not only to provide issues / solutions. It shows the lives of people. It gives the user a sense of sincerity and warm.

17. Describe any changes you would make.

I would try to create channels of communication between participants and system users, to encourage future discussion and help.



## USER TESTING QUESTIONNAIRE

### FOR GROUP B

International  
Students

Dear participant,

Before leaving today, please fill out this questionnaire by answering the questions. Please note the only way you can be identified through this questionnaire is the email address you provide. If you don't have time to stay and complete the questionnaire, please take it with you, complete it, and return it by sending a photocopy to [yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca](mailto:yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca) from the email address you provided.

Thank you for generously volunteering your time to participate in this user testing. Your input will be invaluable in the development of my thesis project. I hope that you find it to be an interesting and enjoyable experience!

PLEASE BE AWARE: YOU ARE HIGHLY ENCOURAGED TO PROVIDE YOUR ANSWERS IN DETAILED SENTENCES.

Your email address: \_\_\_\_\_

### Learnability

1. Do you feel that you successfully experienced the entire system?

The video background & background music is appealing.

2. Do you think the controlling items were well organized and functions were easy to find?

It's hard to scroll down to find the intro video & complete video (too many layers of interaction)

3. Do you think you immediately understood the function of each item?

Yes

4. Were all of the functions you expected to find on the interface being present?

Mostly, the font text at Navigation Bar should be more recognizable

5. In the Scale of 1 – 5. Please RATE the following questions (5 =Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3=Good, 2=Poor, 1=Very Poor)

5.1 How do you rate the functionality of the project system in terms of performance? 3

5.2 How do you rate the graphical user interface design of this system? 4

5.3 How do you rate the system in terms of user-friendliness? 3

5.4 How do you rate the operational performance of this system? 3

#### Terminology and system information

---

6. Do you think the terminology was clear and precise?

Yes

7. Did you feel confused when learning to operate the system?

A little bit too many layers.

8. Is there consistency in the theme used on this system? If not, please indicate.

Yes

9. Did you encounter any difficulty while using the system? If so, please indicate.

Going through too many layers to play  
the completed video

#### Concept

---

10. How do you understand the concept of the system?

International student concept is appealing and would  
engage a significant group of students

11. Do you think that this system is providing valuable information?

Yes

12. Has the system satisfied your requirement as documentary film? Yes

13. Has the system satisfied your academic requirements as media project? Mostly

As an international student yourself,

---

14. Are these stories reflecting your questions before you came to Canada?

Yes, mostly

However, the interactive ~~for~~ barely mention their feeling and experience in homesick and loneliness.

15. What else would you add about ?

- emotional experience.
- homesick
- loneliness
- cultural details

16. What would you represent differently?

Emphasizing more on emotional and feelings.

17. What do you like best/least?

- best. International Students topic, video background, interview

- least: ① has to go through so many layers to watch the entire video

② interviewees barely interpret their feeling, <sup>emotions</sup> perceptions

## USER TESTING QUESTIONNAIRE

FOR GROUP B

International  
Students

Dear participant,

*Before leaving today, please fill out this questionnaire by answering the questions. Please note the only way you can be identified through this questionnaire is the email address you provide. If you don't have time to stay and complete the questionnaire, please take it with you, complete it, and return it by sending a photocopy to [yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca](mailto:yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca) from the email address you provided.*

*Thank you for generously volunteering your time to participate in this user testing. Your input will be invaluable in the development of my thesis project. I hope that you find it to be an interesting and enjoyable experience!*

PLEASE BE AWARE: YOU ARE HIGHLY ENCOURAGED TO PROVIDE YOUR ANSWERS IN DETAILED SENTENCES.

Your email address: \_\_\_\_\_

### Learnability

1. Do you feel that you successfully experienced the entire system?

Yes with a few hitches

2. Do you think the controlling items were well organized and functions were easy to find?

They were organised but the font size & colour made the tabs difficult to read/find.

3. Do you think you immediately understood the function of each item?

Yes

4. Were all of the functions you expected to find on the interface being present?

Not as yet. Could add a little more info about Toronto & then some shared experience. Would help in comparison for new people looking at the website.

5. In the Scale of 1 – 5, Please RATE the following questions (5 =Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3=Good, 2=Poor, 1=Very Poor)

5.1 How do you rate the functionality of the project system in terms of performance? 3

5.2 How do you rate the graphical user interface design of this system? 3

5.3 How do you rate the system in terms of user-friendliness? 3

5.4 How do you rate the operational performance of this system? 3

#### Terminology and system information

---

6. Do you think the terminology was clear and precise?

Yeah. The tab 'By Subject' is not very clear though, could be changed.

7. Did you feel confused when learning to operate the system?

Nope.

8. Is there consistency in the theme used on this system? If not, please indicate.

The images have a modern touch to it but could be changed to make more consistent.

9. Did you encounter any difficulty while using the system? If so, please indicate.

Once I had full-scaled the video, it was difficult to find the tabs to go back/zoom out or exit.

#### Concept

---

10. How do you understand the concept of the system?

The title itself was self explanatory.

11. Do you think that this system is providing valuable information?

It's a feedback from various people so yeah. With more content, it could be optimized.

12. Has the system satisfied your requirement as documentary film? O.K.

13. Has the system satisfied your academic requirements as media project? Yeah

As an international student yourself,

---

14. Are these stories reflecting your questions before you came to Canada?

Not all of them. Could add more content.

15. What else would you add about?

'Different ~~to~~ interests' Although there is a theme section, but more interests could be added to either show variety not just in academics but social life as well

16. What would you represent differently?

~~Too~~ ~~more~~ Something like one... lives in themes from each person to understand the content of the video or the glimpse of personal perspective by people. Also different life scenes would have helped to understand the content of diff videos of the same person.

17. What do you like best/least?

The difficulty with font. (least)

~~The~~ The moving subway felt like the essence of the idea

## USER TESTING QUESTIONNAIRE

FOR GROUP B

International  
Students

Dear participant,

Before leaving today, please fill out this questionnaire by answering the questions. Please note the only way you can be identified through this questionnaire is the email address you provide. If you don't have time to stay and complete the questionnaire, please take it with you, complete it, and return it by sending a photocopy to [yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca](mailto:yj14kg@student.ocadu.ca) from the email address you provided.

Thank you for generously volunteering your time to participate in this user testing. Your input will be invaluable in the development of my thesis project. I hope that you find it to be an interesting and enjoyable experience!

PLEASE BE AWARE: YOU ARE HIGHLY ENCOURAGED TO PROVIDE YOUR ANSWERS IN DETAILED SENTENCES

Your email address

### Learnability

1. Do you feel that you successfully experienced the entire system?

Yes, by navigating through the sections of the website I accessed all the video content offered by the system.

2. Do you think the controlling items were well organized and functions were easy to find?

Yes. The menu to access the various sections could be reached at all times.

3. Do you think you immediately understood the function of each item?

Yes. The commands are self-explanatory.

4. Were all of the functions you expected to find on the interface being present?

5. In the Scale of 1 – 5, Please RATE the following questions (5 =Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3=Good, 2=Poor, 1=Very Poor)

5.1 How do you rate the functionality of the project system in terms of performance? 5

5.2 How do you rate the graphical user interface design of this system? 3

5.3 How do you rate the system in terms of user-friendliness? 4

5.4 How do you rate the operational performance of this system? 5

#### Terminology and system information

---

6. Do you think the terminology was clear and precise?

Yes, but 'subject' could be changed for a less formal word

7. Did you feel confused when learning to operate the system?

No it is straightforward

8. Is there consistency in the theme used on this system? If not, please indicate.

Yes, every person talks about similar topics but from their own perspective. Theme and subject sections could be more similar. Perhaps add a background image to subject section?

9. Did you encounter any difficulty while using the system? If so, please indicate.

No. Everything was working when I tried the system. Tried from my phone and a computer

#### Concept

---

10. How do you understand the concept of the system?

International Student living in Toronto and telling their stories to people considering moving to Toronto to study

11. Do you think that this system is providing valuable information?

Yes, the students talk about topics that are hard to find information  
line



12. Has the system satisfied your requirement as documentary film?

I'd prefer to see all the content at once to call it a documentary film. It feels like an educational tool instead of a film.

13. Has the system satisfied your academic requirements as media project?

As an international student yourself,

14. Are these stories reflecting your questions before you came to Canada?

Yes, especially accommodation. Some of the topics I could find out once I arrived in Toronto. Accommodation is important to know before the move since it's one of the basic needs.

15. What else would you add about?

The other basic need: food.

And Work opportunities for students (during studies and after graduation)

16. What would you represent differently?

Nothing

17. What do you like best/least?

The theme section with background images.