

Facilitation Guide

Using Documentary Videos in the Classroom

Overview

These documentary videos offer portrait-style accounts of professionals who live and work with a strong sense of virtue and purpose. The videos are not biographical summaries or career profiles. They are windows into a life as it is actually lived, and into the character of the person living it.

The purpose of these videos is to provide a moral exemplar: a real person whose example students can observe, reflect on, and learn from. They are designed not to idealize or celebrate their subjects, but to make visible what it looks like to take virtue seriously over the course of a career and a life. Specific virtues may be named directly in some videos, while others surface them more implicitly through the subject's choices, language, and way of engaging with others. In either case, the video gives students something concrete and human to think with.

The documentary videos work well both as pre-class preparation and as an in-class launching point. They can stand alone as the basis for a focused discussion, or be used alongside other resources—such as the short animated explainer videos that introduce individual virtues, or narrative case studies that explore how a virtue operates in professional situations.

What Makes These Videos Different

Faculty familiar with guest speaker formats, career profiles, or biographical case studies will notice several important differences in how these videos function:

- **Virtue illustrated, not argued.** Unlike the explainer videos, which present various perspectives on what a virtue is, the documentary videos show what a virtue looks like: embodied, over time, in a specific person and profession. The goal is not to argue for a definition but to offer an example.
- **The whole person, not just the professional.** By following subjects through their full day including family life, commute, and quiet moments, these videos resist the reduction of professional virtue to workplace conduct alone. Students are invited to consider how virtue is expressed across the different dimensions of a life.
- **Implicit as well as explicit virtue.** Subjects may not always use the language of virtue directly. Part of the work of discussion is helping students identify what virtues are present, what they look like in this particular person's life, and how they are expressed in ways that may not be labeled as such.
- **An exemplar, not a template.** These videos do not present a model to be imitated. The subjects are distinctive people with particular histories, values, and circumstances. Students should be encouraged to engage critically as well as admiringly: what can be

learned from this person's example, and what might look different in another life or profession?

- **Virtues as interconnected.** Although a given video may foreground one or two virtues, the subjects typically embody several at once. Instructors should feel free to surface virtues that students may not immediately name. A video that seems to be about compassion may also illuminate integrity, courage, or humility.

General Discussion Questions

The following sample questions are designed to apply to any of the documentary videos and can serve as a basic starting point for discussion. Instructors should feel free to draw on them selectively, adapt them to the specific video, or set them aside when students generate better questions of their own.

1. What virtues do you see at work in this person's life? Which feel most central to who they are, and how do you see them expressed?
2. What does it mean to the subject to live a meaningful, purpose-driven life? How does their sense of purpose seem to shape the way they act and relate to others?
3. What does this video help you understand about a particular virtue, or about virtue more broadly, that an abstract definition might not capture?
4. Are there moments in the video where you sense the cost or difficulty of living virtuously? What does the video suggest about what virtue requires?
5. What, if anything, would translate from this person's example to your own professional or personal life? What might look different, and why?
6. What questions does this person's example leave open for you? What does it not resolve?

Best Practices Before the Discussion

Assign the video in advance

If possible, ask students to watch the video before class. This will provide time for them to sit with the subject's example and form initial impressions before jumping into discussion. Consider providing one or two orienting questions to focus their viewing, or highlighting one or more of the general discussion questions to consider beforehand.

Know your video

Before facilitating, watch the video yourself—more than once if possible. Identify which virtues seem most present in the subject's life and language, and note where they appear implicitly as well as explicitly. Note where you yourself feel uncertainty or resistance. These can be fruitful places for discussion. Think in advance about ways the discussion might drift away from virtue and toward biography, career admiration, or surface-level takeaways, and consider how you would redirect students.

Set expectations with students

Students may approach these videos as inspirational content or as career profiles, rather than as material for sustained reflection on virtue and professional life. It helps to name the shift explicitly: the goal is not to admire the subject or extract lessons for personal success, but to understand what virtue looks like in a life, and what that might mean for students' own developing sense of purpose and professional identity. Students may initially resist open-endedness. Reassurance that substantive disagreement, including critical engagement with the subject's example, is welcome and productive can help.

Sit in a circle

If possible, position students in a circle. This greatly facilitates a more free-flowing discussion in which students speak to one another, rather than just to you. Small groups or pairs can also be effective if a circle is not possible.

Consider showing a clip in class

Even if students have watched the full video in advance, opening class by showing a short clip together can be a valuable shared experience. A second viewing often surfaces details students missed, and watching together creates a common reference point for discussion.

During the Discussion

Open with observation before interpretation

Begin by grounding the discussion in the video itself. Ask students what they noticed: What stood out? Was there a moment, image, or statement that stayed with them? This keeps early discussion concrete and prevents the conversation from jumping immediately to abstract pronouncements or evaluative judgments. Good opening questions tend to be descriptive: "What do we know about this person from the video?" or "What moment in the video stays with you, and why?"

Move from the person to the virtue

After grounding the discussion in the subject's example, invite students to engage more directly with the virtue or virtues the video surfaces. What do they see? What would they name it? How does the subject's way of living illuminate what a virtue actually means in practice, as distinct from how it might be defined in the abstract? The general discussion questions above can be useful scaffolding for this transition.

Use the discussion questions as scaffolding, not a script

The questions provided are starting points. They are designed to open inquiry, not to direct students toward a particular conclusion. Move between questions fluidly based on where student interest and energy are concentrated. If students generate better questions than the ones provided, follow them.

Invite students to complicate their own claims

When a student offers an interpretation—“this person is virtuous because they put others first” or “this is really just about having a strong work ethic”—invite them, or another student, to examine it from another angle: “Does the video give us any reason to push back on that?” or “What would someone who disagreed with you say?” This builds the habit of holding multiple perspectives simultaneously, which is itself a form of intellectual virtue.

Encourage critical as well as appreciative engagement

Students may feel reluctant to critique a sympathetic subject, or may default to either uncritical admiration or dismissive skepticism. Encourage students to engage with the subject’s example seriously and critically: “What does this person’s example make possible to see? And what might it leave out or obscure?” Asking whether the subject’s circumstances are generalizable, or whether the same virtues might look different in another profession or life context, can open productive distance.

Connect the video to broader professional patterns

The most valuable moments in these discussions often come when students connect the subject’s example to recognizable patterns in professional life: “This reminds me of...” or “I’ve seen something like this in...” These connections extend the video beyond its specific subject and help students develop more transferable frameworks for thinking about virtue in their own future practice.

Allow the discussion to flow

Allow the students to drive the discussion. Resist the urge to interject and facilitate between each student’s comment. Be comfortable with moments of silence while students consider the question at hand. These practices can allow students to go deeper and develop more personal insights and connections to the video.

Common Facilitation Pitfalls

- **Treating the video as inspirational content.** Students may engage with the subject as a source of motivation rather than as material for reflection on virtue. Redirect gently: “Before we talk about what’s inspiring here, let’s spend more time on what virtue actually looks like in this person’s life.”
- **Sliding into biography or career discussion.** Discussion can drift toward the subject’s career path, professional achievements, or personal history rather than staying with virtue. Redirect by returning to the questions: “What does this person’s example tell us about what it means to live virtuously—not just successfully?”
- **Over-identification with the subject.** Students may feel compelled to admire the subject and accept their self-presentation uncritically. Encourage them to maintain some

reflective distance: “Is that the only way to read what we’re seeing, or might someone engage with this differently?”

- **Abstraction without grounding.** Discussion can become purely abstract—“a virtuous professional should always...” Bring conversation back to the video: “What specifically in what we watched supports that?”
- **Uneven participation.** In a seminar or discussion-heavy format, a few voices can dominate. Use structured techniques (think-pair-share, written reflection before discussion) to ensure broader participation.

Closing the Discussion

Reserve a few minutes at the end to ask students to name one thing that will stay with them from the discussion: a question, an image from the video, or a tension they haven’t resolved. This does not need to be a takeaway or a lesson; the goal is simply to mark that something worth thinking about has occurred. Brief written reflection at the end of class can deepen individual processing and give the instructor useful feedback on where students are.

It can also be valuable to close by explicitly naming the virtue or virtues that emerged most strongly in discussion, and asking students to articulate—in a sentence or two—what they now understand about that virtue that they did not understand before. Not a definition, but an observation: “Integrity in the life of a physician seems to be...” or “What courage looks like in this profession is...” These formulations, however provisional, mark genuine movement in understanding.

Adapting Videos Across Contexts

Although each documentary video is grounded in a particular profession, the virtues they illuminate are not profession-specific. Instructors teaching in medicine, law, business, or engineering are encouraged to draw on videos from adjacent fields—either to offer useful contrast or because the underlying virtues closely mirror something in their own domain. Students in mixed or interdisciplinary settings may benefit especially from noticing how the same virtue takes on different expressions and different stakes in different professional contexts.

The documentary videos can also be used in sequence alongside other resources in this project. Paired with the short animated explainer videos, they offer a complementary lens: the explainer asks what a virtue is, while the documentary asks what it looks like. Paired with narrative case studies, they can ground abstract discussion in concrete human example, helping students move between a real life, a fictional scenario, and a conceptual framework for thinking about virtue in professional practice.