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Commentary on Participatory Video

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Abstract

Participatory Video (PV) is a methodological tool to collect more meaningful and relevant data through the direct engagement of people in the research process, while at the same time drawing on accessible means of visual communication to represent the voices and perspectives of those involved. In this article, I first describe the process of PV using my experiences from an ongoing EU-funded research project and how I translate these experiences to teaching PV to Geography Masters students in a two day workshop. I then reflect on how the different stages/phases of PV contribute to giving Geography students an understanding of some of the challenges and opportunities of using PV, as well as wider learning on ethics and positionality that are critical to their research career development.

1. Participatory video in research

I currently work on an EU-funded project called Community Owned Best practice for sustainable Resource Adaptive management (COBRA) - a research project with the mission to "…find ways to integrate community solutions within policies addressing escalating social, economic and environmental crises, through accessible information and communication technologies" in the Guiana Shield region, in South America (see www.projectcobra.org). We use visual methodological tools, including Participatory Video (PV), to help engage people in the research process, but also as a powerful way of representing the voices and perspectives of local communities through accessible means of communication (Lunch and Lunch, 2006; Mistry and Berardi, 2012).

PV can be put into practice either through a facilitator external to the target group/community, or by first training a selected group of community (local) people who then become the PV facilitators. In the COBRA project, we have used the latter approach, which not only builds capacity and skills for the local facilitators but also ensures greater participation in and ownership over the research process.

The PV process can be broken down into four phases – storyboarding, filming, editing and screening. These phases do not always occur in a linear fashion (e.g. some element of screening can occur straight after filming) and more than often it is an iterative process building on

discussion and feedback (e.g. feedback following screening can lead to amendments to the storyboard and further filming). The following is a short description of each PV phase using images taken from the COBRA project as illustrations:

- *Storyboarding*. Storyboarding is generally the first stage in the PV process. This plays a very important role in collating ideas about the topics to be researched, how they will be filmed and what locations and people will be involved. The format of the storyboard (sequential boxes – Figure 1) lends itself to developing a story over time that people can draw, put in queries and comments and annotate as they go through the PV process.
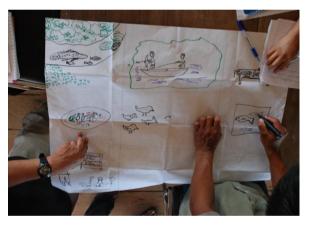

Figure 2. Indigenous researchers in Brazil filming an elder on the common foods which make up a local diet. Source: Jay Mistry, COBRA Project.

Figure 1. People developing a storyboard. Source: Rebecca Xavier, COBRA Project.

Figure 3. The filming of a role-play, where a scenario on local ailments and health are being acted out in the PV. Source: Andrea Berardi, COBRA Project.

- *Filming*. Filming is the way in which information is collected. Some filming may involve interviewing people and/or recording a group discussion. It can also be used to illustrate the theme of discussion by, for example, directly filming aspects of this theme (Figure 2), or engaging individuals in a role-playing activity (Figure 3).

- *Editing*. Editing normally takes place in two stages. The first is through a paper edit (where video clips are noted on paper and physically arranged in the order of the film – Figure 4), which allows people to discuss how they would like the different video material to be represented and the story to be told. This can engender significant discussion and allow participants to think about extra features, such as narration, music, that could be added to the film to enhance the message. The final paper edit can then be used as a template for the computer edit of the video material into a final film as seen in Figures 5a and 5b.

Figure 4. Indigenous researchers sorting and organising their video material in the form of a paper edit.
Source: Jay Mistry, COBRA Project.

Figures 5a and 5b. Indigenous researchers working on developing the PV film on the computer.
Source: Andrea Berardi and Jay Mistry, COBRA Project.

- *Screening*. Screenings of the video material is a critical step in the PV process (Figure 6). At its most basic, for example directly following filming, it allows people to see the material collected and give consent for it to be used. Once video footage is edited into a film, screenings allow participants the opportunity to critique the narrative, suggest what to exclude, and what should be put in which has been left out. It is a form of sharing knowledge and views and can stimulate much discussion (which can also be fed into the final film).

Figure 6. Screening of a PV film in an indigenous community.
Source: Rebecca Xavier, COBRA Project.

2. Participatory video in teaching

Linking my research to teaching, I currently run a two-day workshop with sustainable development Masters level students on PV. During the workshop, students learn the basic skills of operating a video-camera and essential features of PV through a series of games and activities. The main task of the workshop is where students are given an object (e.g. Fairtrade coffee, African newspaper) and asked to make a two-minute film based around the object (the object should also appear in the film at least once). Students take on the role of a community/local facilitator, but they can also "act" in the film as a participant. Students are allowed to use any resources on campus and

move freely to interview potential participants in various locations. In the following, I reflect on how the different stages/phases of PV contribute to giving Geography students an understanding of some of the challenges and opportunities of using PV, as well as wider learning on ethics and positionality that are critical to their research career development.

Storyboarding is a great way for getting students to start discussing what is important to the film they are going to make and how to represent the particular issue (see Figure 1). My experiences show that this process of discussing how and what to film quickly surfaces issues of power and representation. During storyboarding, the students function as facilitators/researchers. In this role, they typically speak about "them" and "us" and start identifying what they want to know from "them" (the participants). It makes them aware that they are the ones with power and are already making decisions about how others could/should be represented.

This supports much of the theoretical literature related to participatory methods which gives students the idea that "participants" are distinct from facilitators/researchers, and the transfer of power and knowledge is often seen as taking place between the facilitator/researcher and the participants. However, experiencing PV allows students to realise that the dichotomy between facilitator/researcher and participant is not static. This is particularly apparent during filming, when students become both facilitators and participants (when being filmed alongside a participant or acting), and during editing, when they put themselves into the shoes of the "participants", while at the same time being "facilitators" ensuring that captured data fits into their themes. In these circumstances, they simultaneously become "researcher and researched, observer and observed, and documentarian and documented" (Kindon, 2003, p146). This blurring of roles and boundaries, while making some students (visibly) uncomfortable, gives them the opportunity to really experience some of the conflictual and compromising situations that participatory research can create.

PV can provide a "space" for people to air and voice their opinions, tell their stories and/or

feel confident to participate (Figures 2 and 3). Through the experience of practising PV themselves, students get a feel for what it is like holding the microphone, being in front of the camera and behind it. Although not all students like talking in front of the camera (as you find in PV projects), there is a general feeling that holding the microphone and being filmed means that a "space" has been created in which others will have to listen to you. Holding a camera can also encourage certain members of a group/community to interact with others they might have not done so before. I particularly like Figures 3, 5a and 5b – many of my female students have commented that previously they would leave it up to their male colleagues to approach and interview participants. But once they got behind the camera, they felt more confident to interview people themselves, noting that the technology changed the dynamics of the situation to make it "safer" for them. A similar feeling of "empowerment" came about when students who initially did not feel they were technologically-savvy, were able to complete the computer edit of the film. As Figure 5b shows, although the minority, the female participant emanates confidence as she works at editing on the computer.

When planning research, it is easy for students to categorise potential participants into a homogenous group of the "poor", "grassroots", "marginalized", as if they are all speaking in one voice, assigned to by the facilitator/researcher. Through PV, as people tell their stories or give their opinions, students learn that even within one specific "community" or "group", you cannot assign a unified identity to all participants. This becomes particularly apparent during screenings (see Figure 6) when a wider group of people have the opportunity to comment on the PV film. These opportunities to share information and opinions makes students aware that there could be existing power relations within a so-called "unified" group and that a single person could tell the same story in different ways depending on the power relations.

In addition, it makes students think about what is "authentic knowledge". In some of the PV films, students tend to interview what they term "participants" and "experts". These "experts" are generally academic staff members

that can talk with authority about a specific issue (e.g. Fairtrade, labour rights etc.). During the storyboard phase of PV, students see these "experts" as adding valuable information to their stories. However, interestingly, when it comes to editing where these "expert" opinions are juxtaposed against the "participants", students begin to question the validity of the different views being presented. They realise that using the "expert" can sometimes validate but can also undermine the participants' contributions.

3. Conclusions

PV engenders team working, listening to others, giving ownership of the research process to others, and the idea that participants can be co-researchers. At the same time, it is highly enjoyable and students always comment to me on the amount of laughing that took place at different stages of the PV process. One of the best wider lessons learnt through PV is the need to be adaptive during any form of research;

students generally comment on how their original storyboard was modified as they went through the PV process reflecting how new opportunities or ideas were added in and/or preconceived ideas were removed. This skill of being adaptive will be vital when they embark on their own research careers.

References

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