

Using participatory video to explore teachers' lived experiences

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Teachers who work in economically and socially disadvantaged environments have first-hand knowledge of the challenges that can impede teaching and learning, yet their voices are often ignored when researchers and policy-makers attempt to address such issues. In this article we describe how we attempted to make teacher voices audible via an intervention based on participatory visual methodology. A two-day participatory research-as-intervention workshop enabled twelve teachers from economically and socially disadvantaged township schools to produce videos that examined some challenges applicable to their praxis. The process of producing the participatory video offered the teachers the opportunity to learn more about themselves and their educational contexts, and to position themselves as “teachers who care”, as they collectively identified pertinent issues affecting their practice, decided on how to represent those issues visually and how to further use the finished product as a tool for teaching and/or community engagement.

Keywords: participatory visual methodologies; research as intervention; participatory video; agency; pastoral role

Introduction

“Together we can make a difference” are the words used by one group of teachers to conclude their short video. These words highlight the importance of acknowledging the constructive influence embodied in teaching. Based on their lived experiences¹ in the educational environment, teachers interpret their context and construct meaning, which influences how they prepare the learners for their eventual roles as responsible global citizens.

This premise is based on Dewey's (1938) earlier, but still relevant, philosophy that a strong interconnectedness exists between education and experience, and the fact that teachers draw strongly on their own experiences when they teach (Chan, 2006). For Dewey (1938), however, experience has both a personal and a social connotation, because individuals exist among other human beings and cannot be understood outside of their social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As teachers work together on a project such as making a participatory video, they learn from each other and are exposed to varied and alternative interpretations of their lives in context. Moreover, their collective experiences, both past and present, help them to imagine future experiences and how current situations could be changed for the better (Dewey, 1938).

In this article, we focus on the expressions of teachers portrayed in the participatory videos they produced, based on our belief that the teachers' “experience is the primary agency of education” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988: ix) and that the videos reveal their perceptions of what is significant in their working

context. The ability of teachers to influence positive change should not be underestimated (Osman & Kirk, 2001), and ultimately, *teacher* knowledge should be at the forefront of educational interventions, rather than be created from the theoretical assumptions of academics or policy/curriculum planners, who are not necessarily in touch with the reality of daily school life (Craig & Olson, 2002). How teachers respond to issues that they perceive as barriers to effective teaching and learning thus constitutes the focal point in this research project.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988, xv) contend that teachers' voices are often ignored, resulting in their feeling devalued and demotivated. In contrast, it can be argued that if teachers know that they are heard and valued, they will possibly become more inspired, passionate and dedicated in their practice. In this article we offer a practical and transformational way of encouraging teachers to make their voices heard, since much can be learned from their first-hand experiences and interpretations of issues relevant to education today. Since transformational experiences can "change the pathways of one's life" (Hopp, 2001:274), both the education system and the teachers themselves can benefit from such involvement.

We frame the teachers' participatory video work within the pastoral role of teachers as identified in the Norms and standards for educators (DoE, 2000), since this role is one that they are increasingly having to develop, particularly in an era where HIV/AIDS is affecting South African school communities (HEAIDS, 2010), yet it is one in which they are less likely to have received formal training.

Research design

Our research design is influenced by the notion of "liberatory pedagogy" (Freire, 1998) as "the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Thompson, drawing on Paulo Freire, in Mayo, 1999:5). Our choice of using participatory video was therefore aimed at not only helping the teachers liberate themselves from their own beliefs about the inability of teachers to address the poverty-related social issues affecting education, but also to raise their awareness of how embodiment of the pastoral role could bring about positive change in the lives of their learners. The following research questions were formulated to reflect these aims:

- What issues do teachers perceive to be barriers to teaching and learning?
- How can participatory video be used with teachers to promote an understanding of their ability to address these barriers?

We had been working for two years with the twelve participant teachers on a project entitled Masenze Umekhluko (translated from isiXhosa as: let us make a difference), using various approaches to help them to develop their agentic potential to address the social issues that were impinging on their ability to provide quality teaching and learning experiences for learners. The participants, (three from two different high schools and nine from four different primary schools in the township of Motherwell), were all teachers who had volunteered to be part of this project. The project had originated at the request of the principal of one primary schools in the area, who had identified the need to help teachers in this regard.

This research approach was qualitative (Creswell, 2003) and participatory (Pain & Francis, 2003), following an emergent and unstructured design (Willis, 2007). We adopted an interpretive approach as we attempted to gain a deep understanding (Willis, 2007:100) of the participants' expressions. In participatory research, a partnership between researchers and participants is formed, so the research is conducted *with* them and not *on* them (Willis, 2007:209). Participating teachers have an opportunity to play an active part in the process, sharing their expertise and power in a relationship characterised by trust, connectedness and open communication (Hogan & Flather, 1993:100). Pain and Francis (2003:48) caution that equality of researchers and participants is crucial for effective change and empowerment to take place. At this stage of the project, similar to the previous stages, the participating teachers chose the focus of the research, generated the data through their video productions, contributed to data analysis by acting as a critical audience and gave input into the final representation of the data. It was therefore important to us as researchers to be vigilant about "who talks, and who acts in the process; whose knowledge dominates in the process; whose language is used as a medium in the process and how is the knowledge produced" (Van

der Riet & Boettiger, 2009:1). This level of participation and learning also resonates with Freire's (1970) notion of reciprocity, i.e. between researchers and participants, and among participants themselves, thus being engaged with and learning from each other.

Visual methodologies

Over the past two decades visual methodologies have been used more frequently in social research (Banks, 2001; Gauntlet & Holzwarth, 2006:82; Rose, 2001). Image-based empirical social inquiry and visual methodologies, such as film and video, embrace the prospect of unlocking a deeper understanding of our social reality (Wagner, 2007:26), while acting as “intimate connections to the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon” (Stanczak, 2007:5), providing unexpected and surprising discoveries and details of situations (David, 2007) that other approaches may overlook.

Visual media can have a significant influence on people's thinking (Gauntlet & Holzwarth, 2006:82), as creative images convey messages in a way that the written word cannot. Visual methodology is also a powerful way of promoting the construction of knowledge and meaning in the social and academic world (Stanczak, 2007), since visual images are not mere illustrations, but intrinsic components of the research itself. The crucial elements of visual methodologies are engagement, fun, creativity and bringing about new knowledge and change (De Lange, Mitchell, Moletsane, Stuart & Buthelezi, 2006), and they were thus ideally suited to the purposes of this research.

Data production: participatory video

Participatory video provides an alternative approach for teachers to explore burning issues that are important to them and that affect their lives as teachers and the production of a video requires that a small group of participants construct their specific video script. The role of the researcher is that of facilitator, who provides an opportunity to foster learning (Bateson, 1994:4) by highlighting differences and challenging assumptions, values and beliefs. The development of the story line is left in the hands of the teachers. Here the twelve participants were divided randomly into two groups of six. Each group was given paper and pen for planning the storyboard activities, as well as a video camera and a tripod (see Figure 1) to film their storyboard.



Figure 1: Trying out the video camera and planning the shoot

This process of reflection, deconstruction and reconstruction around their perceived challenges allowed the participants to simultaneously learn from each other's experiences and create new experiences as they individually and collectively "generated visions" for themselves and each other (Price & Osborne, 2000:28).

It is of vital importance to involve every member of the group in the process and in the actual video production, including learning to use the camera (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Shooting the video documentary

A "No Editing Required" (NER)² approach was followed. In order to promote communication and creativity, it was stressed that the participants could choose to work in isiXhosa, their home language. At the end of the workshop each group had their video ready to screen in front of both groups. While we thought it appropriate for teachers to produce the participatory videos separately in two smaller groups, we wanted them to have an opportunity to see each other's work and to appreciate the different perspectives.

When we returned a week or two later, to watch the composite video³ put together by a videographer, sub-titles in English and isiXhosa were created for the various scenes by the teachers themselves, enabling a wider audience to follow the story-line and to hear the "voices" of these teachers.

Trustworthiness

The literature emphasises that the focus in qualitative research shifts more to the interpretation of significance than discovering generalisability (Geelan, 2003). The *dependability and trustworthiness* of the research demand verification of the process through access, honesty, verisimilitude, authenticity, familiarity, transferability and clarity of the data (Webster & Mertova, 2007). During this research every attempt was made to record and make accessible the information on the process and its outputs. The research is well grounded and supported by the rigour of the process and the rich, coherent and persuasive information that was generated through the process.

Ethical considerations

Participants participated in the project voluntarily and received regular feedback from the researchers. The teachers gave informed consent for their participation and were not at risk in any way. They were also aware that they could be identified in the videos and signed a waiver, allowing the videos to be used by the researchers and other participants for educational and research purposes. The researchers strived

throughout to maintain honesty and trust in the relationship with the participating teachers (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The ethical aspect of participatory video as a research method remains problematic (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), for example, as regards the question of who owns the video documentaries - the project leader, the researchers, the participants who produce the videos? In the case of this research, the videos were given to the teachers to use as tools to provoke discussion in their school communities, while the researchers kept a copy for research dissemination purposes. Since the teachers themselves played the various roles in the videos, there were no ethical issues around the lack of anonymity of learners, parents or community members.

Analysing the participatory videos

Analysing film and television texts involves the scrutiny of the following layers of text: (1) *the primary text*, namely the participatory video, (2) *the secondary text*, made up of the viewers' responses (e.g. audiences), and (3) *the production text*, made up of what the producers (namely the teachers) had to say (Fiske 1987). These layers cannot always be disconnected from one another, as they sometimes overlap. The analysis of these three layers of text is framed by the pastoral role that teachers play, which, according to the Department of Education (2000), includes developing both a supportive environment for the learners and supportive relations with parents and other key people and organisations, to address the needs of learners (DoE, 2000). Since most teachers are not fully equipped to take up this role (Wood, 2008) we wanted to encourage further exploration in this intervention.

The primary text: the completed participatory video

Through a process of discussion, prioritisation and negotiation, the teachers identified two 'burning issues' related to their pastoral role as teacher. These were identified as i) parental involvement in education, and ii) poverty as it impacts on learners. Once the topics had been chosen, the two groups of teachers had to write a storyboard of approximately ten scenes or shots of 10-30 seconds each to represent their chosen issue visually, before shooting their video with technical support provided by the researchers.

The title of the first participatory video was *Absenteeism of learners and parental involvement*, illustrating how an teacher takes steps to investigate the situation of a learner who is often absent from school. She sends a letter to the parent, visits the parent at home, and then takes the matter up with the principal, who suggests a team effort to resolve the problem. This highlights the teachers' concern about learners not attending school, and shows their willingness to extend their pastoral role as teachers to ensure that the learner is at school and able to learn. It also conveys their understanding of the need to work collaboratively with parents and other teachers.

The title of the second participatory video was *The effect of poverty on learners*, also highlighting the teachers' pastoral concern about the health and well being of their learners. This video conveys the teachers' willingness to 'go the extra mile' and make home visits to try and resolve problems they perceive their learners to be facing. The team of teachers in the video decided to enlist the help of outside agencies on behalf of the learner, again indicating that they are aware of the need to be proactive and to partner with resources outside of the school.

The videos of the two groups of teachers, as primary texts, first highlight the challenge, on which they reflect and follow up with a practical and workable solution to address it, clearly demonstrating their willingness to take up their pastoral role, but also proactively effecting change in their world of work (Thompson, drawing on Paulo Freire, in Mayo, 1999). The two participatory videos were combined with footage of the process of making the videos and turned into a composite video of about ten minutes, called *Teachers and parents take hands* (see <http://www.nmmu.ac.za/default.asp?id=11180&bhcp=1>).

The secondary text

The composite video was shown to an audience of 38 teachers who all teach in schools in areas characterised by social problems typically related to economically disadvantaged communities, e.g. where basic physical needs for food, shelter and clothing are not adequately met, and where crime, substance abuse, hunger, parental neglect, and violence to mention a few, feature regularly. From the start, the audience was engrossed in the video, remaining silent throughout the showing. At the end, the consensus was that the video highlighted *problems we really have*, indicating that the audience could identify with the issues raised. Moreover, the video helped to *increase the learning* of some of the teachers in the audience. For example, the video where the teacher visited the parent at home prompted one teacher to comment, *It is great, I have also gained something about visiting homes – I had never even thought of doing this before – now I am motivated to do so*. Several teachers pointed out the courage required to conduct home visits. This comment sparked off a lively discussion among all the teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of home visits. The video could therefore be seen to act as a catalyst for shifting the mindsets of the teachers and opening up new possibilities for them to explore further understanding of their pastoral roles.

The video also acted as a tool to spark discussion around stigmatisation. One teacher asked for clarification about the comment in the video that schools should be careful not to create an opportunity for stigmatisation when distributing food parcels, clearly something not all teachers had thought about when providing support to learners. Many of the other teachers then shared their experiences and advice was given as to how to approach this issue. The video also increased the *motivation* of some teachers to address similar issues in their schools, “*It is a reviver [sic]*”.

Finally, the teachers could identify ways that the video could be used as *a learning tool* in the learning areas of Arts and Culture (discussions on drama/video making), Language (writing of alternate scripts, practising of the Xhosa language), Social Sciences (discussion about social issues) and Economic Management Sciences (poverty/economic situation of different communities). Similarly, it could also be used to initiate discussion on the issues with parents, opening up the space for engaging and supporting the community, and with colleagues, creating an opportunity to further their own professional development.

It is clear from the above that the engagement with a wider audience created an opportunity to learn and to reflect on their pastoral role, in particular in terms of how to practise and promote an attitude which is critical, committed and ethical, in developing a sense of respect and responsibility towards others (DoE, 2000; HEAIDS 2010).

The production text

While busy with the production of the participatory videos, the teachers enthusiastically adopted a leadership role in deciding which topics to compose their storyboards around. Their cooperation with each other was noticeable, although lively debate ensued as they each presented their ideas and versions of what the issue is and what should be done about it. Their participation and interest became evident, as they all took on various active roles in the constructed dramatisations, such as acting, operating the camera, directing or time keeping. Their enthusiasm, laughter and informal comments, as seen and heard in the final composite video, serve as proof of the pleasure they derived from their participation. Their pride in and satisfaction with the final product are also self-evident – they have enjoyed a ‘mastery experience’ (Bandura, 1997), which has undoubtedly increased their self-efficacy beliefs. During a follow-up session, the composite video was shown to the participating teachers.

A video-recorded discussion was facilitated around the following questions: What would you like to say about the participatory videos? What do you appreciate most about them? What did you not like about them? What would you change if you could? What are the lessons that can be learned from them? How would you use them to convey a message in your community? What problems do you envisage in showing such a video to audiences?

Their responses indicated an increased consciousness about their pastoral role and their own agency, although they were aware that they could develop more in this area: *We have a potential that can be used more.*

Another teacher remarked: *I am happy ... now others can see the problems at our school.* This remark indicates that the teacher had perhaps felt that her voice regarding the challenges facing her school had previously not been heard, but now she had a ‘tool’ to make the challenges visible.

They appreciated that they had been encouraged to construct their videos around relevant topics of their own choosing, that they believed represented their true contexts: *they (the topics) are the ones really that are affecting our schools.* They also appreciated the fact that they could create such a product as *it is our own production, we can take ownership for it.* In terms of skills development, they acknowledged that their technical skills had improved since their first attempts to produce the participatory videos, although some of the ‘special effects’ they achieved, such as a cock crowing in the background during the home visit, which added authenticity to their video, were actually unintended. They were not uncritical of their work, and picked up technical shortcomings, such as cutting the shot while in the middle of something (such as a sentence or a song), an unsteady hand, and the wrong light exposure at times (shooting into the sun).

They have, however, learnt that they can do things that they would never before even have dreamt of attempting (making a video), and this has increased their confidence and will most likely have a positive effect on their willingness to try new things in future – an important life skill they should be passing on to learners.

They were convinced that these participatory videos could be used in their community to convey their message to other stakeholders in education, such as colleagues, parents, department of education officials, school governing bodies and churches, all of whom they thought should work together towards educating and caring for the children of the community.

The experience of engaging in participatory video seems to have made them more conscious of their own agency and provoked a desire to be heard, precisely what our research aimed to do - they expressed the wish that department of education officials should see the composite video and requested a meeting with the appropriate people, to carry their message further. We will encourage and assist them to set up such an event. All participating schools received a copy of the composite video to take their message further into their community.

Linking participatory video with educational change

Swanepoel (2008) emphasises that teachers are key role-players in bringing about educational change and implementing these changes effectively in the classroom. This can happen only if they feel confident and able to act as role models and agents of social change, and are able to “discover how to participate in the transformation of their world”, in Freireian terms (Thompson, drawing on Paulo Freire, in Mayo, 1999:5). While we do not suggest such grandiose transformation, the teachers, through this participatory work, discovered (or for some, rediscovered) how they could take up their pastoral role and contribute to transforming their professional practice and to making a difference in the lives of their learners.

Pring (2001:101) refers to education as a “moral practice”, because it is based on moral roots and serves the well being of learners. Teachers respond to issues in education by drawing on their personal sense of what is morally appropriate, on empathy, and on their love and care for their learners, based on their own understanding of life. The participating teachers’ moral responses to their work-related challenges are portrayed in these participatory videos. They tell about their lives within a particular social and educational context, reflecting the issues that affect their classroom practice. The videos highlight and promote their role as caring professionals, while emphasising the challenges they face in executing this pastoral role. They play a meaningful role in taking up and addressing current issues and constructing the future for their learners (Harris, 1994; Swanepoel, 2008), thereby intervening in the lives of their learners in a significant way, with their voices acting as a catalyst for meaningful change.

Conclusion

This article illustrates that teachers' lived experiences can be explored and made visible by means of participatory videos. The medium of participatory video allows teachers to be proactive in making their voices heard and the final product has the potential to influence other role-players in the education system. Using visual participatory methodologies, in particular the process of producing a video of their lived experience, contributed to the personal and professional development of the teachers, while also producing a teaching and learning resource that foregrounds contextually relevant issues and how teachers respond to them as caring professionals.

1. "Lived experience" an expression also used in phenomenology highlights the lived quality of the essence of experience (Burch, 1991).
2. Monica Mak coined the term 'No Editing Required' (NER) to refer to the use of "on camera" revisions. Each scene of the storyboard is shot only once, with the participants then moving on to the next scene.
3. A composite video draws together video footage of the participatory video process as well as the participatory videos that were generated by the participants. See also Mitchell and De Lange (2010) who have used the method in various projects and with various participants, and along the way have refined the composite video genre.

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