

USING PARTICIPATORY VIDEO FOR ACTION RESEARCH: negotiating the space between social process and research product

Jacqueline Shaw

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an account of the practice and processes used by Real Time, a UK-based professional media organisation and educational charity. Real Time is a voluntary-sector provider that offers consultancy and project services to government and non-statutory agencies in the Health and Social Care sector. Participatory Video is a facilitated group method that involves participants in communicating their own experiences, issues and stories on video.

There is developing interest in the possibilities of visual methods in researching complex social problems. Real Time specialises in applying participatory video as a collaborative group process to engage service users in exploring explanations and possible ways forward for issues that have proved hard to address in other ways.

Real Time works in a diverse range of settings. Projects take place with groups such as those with physical or learning disabilities, people with mental health issues, refugees, homeless and unemployed people, and women, young, elderly, black and minority ethnic people from marginalised communities. For instance, a bridge-building project aimed to improve dialogue between travellers and the council, and a community consultation project researched young people's perspectives to involve them actively in area regeneration on a run-down estate. In another example, looked-after (in care) young people researched the issues they had accessing education, and the resulting DVD and work pack were used to train education providers. A self-advocacy project with people with learning disabilities researched the issue of work, with both their peers and employers, to open future opportunities, and a group of Asian women researched attitudes to disability in the local Asian communities.

This paper draws on research into Real Time's approach (Shaw 2012) to suggest that awareness of the potential needs to be balanced with awareness of the difficulties, constraints and complex relational dynamics when it is applied in real world contexts.

1. THE PROMISE AND PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATORY VIDEO

As a type of Participatory Action Research (e.g. Kindon 2003; Shaw 2007), Participatory Video is a way of mediating social research processes. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative research method, characterised by the active involvement of people with real-life experience of the issue or situation to be researched (the participants). Researcher-facilitators (or practitioners) structure and stimulate interaction to enable participant insight on the topic and facilitate them in influencing solution options. The intention is both to catalyse social processes of benefit to participants, and to unearth new knowledge towards wider social improvement (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005).

Video is considered a good participatory tool for a number of reasons: Recording and playback provides the rationale for self-expression and group discussion. As a creative medium, video is accessible and easy to use (with enabling support). Participatory video is a group activity that can promote an inclusive dynamic and collaborative action. Finally, as an

oral/visual medium, which does not depend on written literacy, video provides a way to communicate with external others without having to speak in person.

Participatory Video generally involves a group producing video recordings in collaboration with professional practitioners, but there is not one method. As video has become increasingly available, many group facilitators have utilised it worldwide. In the UK, various approaches have developed, of which the Real Time model is a particular example. For example, the Participant Authored Audiovisual Stories (PAAS) model (Ramella and Olmos 2005), gives the camera over to participants after initial training rather than facilitating the collaborative process throughout. Alternatively, the Hi8tus approach (Dowmunt, Dunford and Van Hemert 2007) enables excluded young people to tell their stories through participatory scripting based on improvisation. Local young people act in the resulting video dramas, but they are often video recorded by professionals. There is clearly not one correct participatory video method. However, because what happens on projects and what that can lead to is so contextual, I focus in this paper on the Real Time's approach as particular exemplar to tease out the specific issues of using video in context.

2. THE REAL TIME¹ APPROACH

The fundamental character of Real Time's approach is the use of video as a *group-based activity* to support and mediate *social processes* (Shaw and Robertson 1997). It is an emergent process of interaction between practitioners, participants and the outside world, which intends to build group influence over a social agenda. Real Time practitioners structure and facilitate the interactive processes involved, but this is in order to establish a dynamic that creates space for every individual to contribute, and to prioritise the group topic and video content agenda against external influences. It is thus a relational practice, backed up by video, but communication shifts from internal to external focus in four stages each with a distinct inter-subjective function (Shaw 2012), as I now define.

Stage 1 - Opening a conducive environment for group dialogue

Real Time's first stage is focussed on motivating individuals to take part in group dialogue in the new social space of the project session. Project work starts with small closed groups (6-8), in familiar venues based in community contexts. Video functions as the hook to attract individuals to take part. Participants' experiences are at the centre of the action, as subjects of their own consideration, which practitioners think motivates them to continue.

Barriers to public expression for disadvantaged people are generated by the insidious social norms that mean some believe they have nothing worth saying, they can't speak up, or that nobody will listen. The intention at this stage is to build individual confidence and capacity, as well as self-expression, through interaction between group members in confidential project spaces. Each session engages participants in experiential learning through video exercises. Real Time believes that successful hands-on use of video equipment is important in generating a sense-of can do, particular for the many participants who are techno-phobic. This means every group-member takes turns in all roles.

The other main aim at this stage is to use video activities to create a dynamic in which each person is given opportunity to input and succeed. This means that many of Real Time's basic techniques, such as participants taking turns on the camera, or speaking on the microphone, are different to traditional video production techniques. It also involves practitioners intervening to ensure that sessions are not dominated by one or two more confident individuals, as often happens during less structured group processes.

Stage 2 – Building communication purpose

Participants on projects do not usually have a pre-constructed message or story that they want to communicate on video. Indeed an important aspect of what the Real Time participatory video process offers is a way of participants exploring ideas together to develop their opinions about the issue of concern. Once an inclusive dynamic is established, the focus therefore shifts to building group communication purpose.

Stage two proceeds through iteratively developing video exercises. Each exercise involves a cycle of recording, video play back and reflection. The communicative function of video at this stage is to structure and systemise a progression from individual expression, through internal discussion between participants, towards identifying a common group focus. Real Time perceives video recording and playback helps participants stand back from their experience, and reflect with some distance. Going out with the video camera to record participants' everyday environments also assists the group in seeing their situation afresh.

Practitioners provide the framework for each video exercise, to encourage slow development in the depth of sharing as trust in the group grows. However, it is participant's interests that guides the content of recordings. Through repeated cycles of videoing action and reflection, a group can unpick problems, increase awareness and re-frame their own understanding.

Real Time believes separating this internally focused stage from video production is crucial to avoiding inappropriate exposure, as it provides time for participants to develop informed understanding and control of what they communicate externally. However, this stage can be compromised due to video production pressure, as I will explain further through example later. Ideally, it is only after a minimum of 4-6 development sessions that the focus shifts to think about what to communicate to others external to the group.

Stage 3 – Collaborative video production

The third stage of Real Times process involves participants making a video to communicate their experiences, stories, ideas or views to an external audience. At this stage, video obviously functions as the creative medium, and the activity focus is external communication.

Although, it is relatively easy to learn basic video recording functions, making a coherent video involves a range of technical, narrative and organisational skills. For this reason, Real Time continues to facilitate the production process, but the practitioner role develops from structuring video exercises, and facilitating a conducive group dynamic, to following and supporting the group production agenda. Participants are not expected to plan a complete video in advance, when they have no previous production experience. Instead, video-making progresses in iterative stages, with new sections planned and storyboarded, after reflection on the last section and current needs. This structure maximises the possibility of participant creativity by bounding it manageably.

Stage 4 – Increasing participant social influence through external dialogue

Real Time often applies participatory video to instigate dialogue *between* top-down agency decision-makers and participants living a social problem. Stage 4 involves participants interacting with other people through video-making and showing videos in wider social forums.

At this stage, video functions to re-position participants more influentially than usual. Making a video enables them to ask questions to people they would not normally speak to. Showing the finished videos, means that others listen to what they have to say, because that is the convention of the producer-audience relationship. Through taking part actively in collaborative production they do in actuality become social actors in the wider world. If there are significant others prepared to listen to their explanations for issues and their ideas for solutions, this can lead to social improvements.

3. REAL TIME PROJECT EXAMPLES

The assumption in the literature (e.g. White 2003) is that Participatory Video can provide the practical link between increasing confidence, group building, critical development and group action towards social improvement. However, it is not a magic bullet. There are practical paradoxes that create tensions in applying the ideals in real life context. In particular, confusion stems from whether the purpose lies in the process or product. I now look at some Real Time project examples to unpack the key issues.

A – Communicate

Video is presumed enjoyable, but it may be off-putting and uncomfortable if not introduced sensitively. Furthermore, project processes can be taken over by the most assertive in any context. Real Time addresses these issues during the first and second stage.

For example, Communicate involved four video sessions with recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers at a local support centre. It aimed to involve potential clients in talking about their support needs. The main gain identified by participants was increased communication confidence, even though some initially felt video not for them. They thought sessions increased their ability to speak up publicly more than their English classes.

However, the Pakistani women did not want video recordings watched outside the group, as their families would forbid it. In this case, there was no problem, as the organisers understood that video processes had generated new knowledge because they were not for external showing. The assumption that a video will be the research output can result from a misunderstanding of the differences between internal and external communication processes.

B- Our Lives

A project with older people at a day centre aimed to use past reflections to engage group-members in addressing what would assist adjustment to their current lives in changing circumstances. This was a predominately process intention, but the organisers expected a video at the end. This led to issues. In particular, early on one participant opened up very intimately in front of the camera about personal issues of maltreatment. The practitioner was concerned about exposure, but the centre workers encouraged him to continue, and wanted what he said to be part of a final video. Practitioners ensured that didn't happen, but this highlights the importance of a safe internal communication space, during which people develop some practical understanding of the implications of speaking up, and then decide later what they want to communicate externally.

There is clearly a very real risk of inappropriate exposure, especially in therapeutic settings where people are used to talking frankly, which has to be balanced with enabling people to be heard. Moreover, this is a specific issue for many of the more vulnerable groups that Real Time works with, particularly those who may not understand the implications of consent, such as people with learning disabilities or those with memory difficulties, as well as those less able to refuse for language or cultural reasons. In this case, there was not a clear separation in project structure between Real Time stage 2 and stage 3. This becomes even more important when external agendas generate video production pressure.

C – Homeless People's Healthcare

The practical challenges of Participatory Video are not only about process and product, but also where the control of the research agenda lies. For example, a community health council commissioned Real Time to work with homeless people to explore the topic of healthcare. Stage one and two of the project process firstly involved building participants' communication confidence as they shared experiences, as well as their video skills. Then video exercises catalysed group reflection on what helped and hindered people's access to healthcare. Only after several weeks exploring and refining ideas, were video statements and interviews recorded for the final video.

The health authority was keen to find out homeless people's perspectives. During stage 3, video production was a way of investigating problems. Participants documented traditional and homeless focused services, and interviewed each other and external experts. The final video identified factors such as chaotic lifestyles that make it difficult for homeless people to keep appointments, and the attitudes and interactions that make them uncomfortable when they attend the doctor's surgery. Finally, in stage 4, the DVD was used to train nurses, GPs and surgery staff in how to provide appropriate services.

Organisers considered this project a success in reaching new understanding on the issue, and in stimulating improvements. However, in following the externally introduced research agenda, nobody asked whether the homeless video-makers gained anything of value for themselves as a consequence of taking part.

D – We Care

As a contrast, there is also the issue of whether health and social care agencies are prepared to take part in dialogue, when research agendas are instigated *bottom-up* by participants. In the We Care project long-term carers isolated at home, in partnership with a support worker, approached Real Time because they wanted to highlight the difficulties they faced. The group made a DVD that was shown at a celebratory screening during a Carers' week.

Participants valued the opportunity to share their experiences, work as a group with others in similar circumstances, and be heard voicing their opinions in public. They also identified the sense of achievement and the control they had over project processes, as important to them. Audiences thought the video led to new understanding, and practitioners attributed this to the deep reflection that occurred through peer interviews between carers guided by their lived knowledge of the issue.

However, although the support worker ensured the video was watched by a variety of relevant local and national agencies, participant's involvement stopped at the screening. The funding agency could tick boxes because carers had been consulted, but despondency can occur if nothing changes for people as a result of their effort. Moreover, such video outputs are better viewed as the start of an ongoing conversation between agencies and service users. Despite this there is rarely finance to support participants in further dialogue post-production. This means that there is a danger that videos intended as discussion starters, containing participants' evolving views as a first step toward solution, are ossified as their final word on the matter. Project structures thus need to support Real Time's fourth stage if the potential is to be fully realised.

E - Every other Saturday

Single-loop project structures, which support participants making one video only, have arisen because Participatory Video developed in parallel with mass communication models such as television production. However, more recently the internet has underpinned a communication transformation that resources bottom-up multi-direction interchange. The exchange of shorter communication units is supported through Real Time's iterative production processes as well as their utilisation of in-camera editing processes, which enable participants to produce messages quickly without the need for time-consuming editing. The 'Every Other Saturday' project exploited this potential.

This project with Afro-Caribbean men living apart from their children, aimed to address the '*Baby Daddies*' media representation through re-positioning them positively as parents. The group initially formed to increase understanding of fathering roles, to develop relationship skills, and to build support networks for themselves and others. Rather than producing one longer video, they quickly made in-camera edited clips posing pertinent questions, which they posted on their website. This attracted more members and generated further discussion. They then made additional video clips after reflection. Although there was a longer video made, video processes were used as a way of mediating iteratively developing dialogue rather than to communicate one fixed view.

4. THE PRACTICAL PARADOXES

All Participatory Action Research has to balance the time and priority given to the project action focussed on participant benefit, with a research output towards increased social understanding. These Real Time examples have given a flavour of the potential of Participatory Video. They have also shown how video can amplify the challenges because of misplaced expectations about the product, a confusion between internal and external communication processes, and issues connected with content control. I now summarise the key areas to consider when using Participatory Video.

Accessing hard to reach perspectives

In using video to engage marginalised groups in exploring issues, Real Time faces one of the main challenges of participatory research (e.g. Mansuri and Rao 2007). The purpose is to reach less accessible perspectives. The practical paradox is that people living knotty lives may be the least likely to come forward and take part.

I have shown how Real Time's first and second stage processes of internal interaction can open new enabling contexts (Humphreys and Jones 2006), to engage people in exploring tacit understanding. Furthermore, relationships can be mediated within these new social spaces so that they can be re-configured more equitably (High 2005). I suggest that this kind of approach, in creating an intermediate semi-public space, in which participants interact in confidence, is a way of creating the conditions to involve people who would not enter the wider social sphere directly.

Distinguishing between internal and external communication

This article has highlighted the difference between using video to support internal and external communication processes, and the importance of practically separating them to avoid the risk of inappropriate exposure. It has also identified the common tension in Participatory Video projects between process and product, which can be amplified when supporting agencies have strongly pre-determined notions about video products.

These examples demonstrate the production of videos to communicate participants perspectives. However, I suggest it is also important to recognise the new knowledge that may emerge through internal project interactions, which does not need to be recorded to be of value.

Supporting ongoing social dialogue between different perspectives

Many contemporary issues involving multiple social perspectives in the current context of social complexity and uncertainty are unlikely to be solved by single agencies. The assumption is that video can provide the practical link, between the micro-level of group interaction and the wider social world through providing a means to re-position participants. However, I have illustrated how perceiving video as the end of rather than the start of dialogue between various perspectives can limit this potential. I propose that post-production support needs to be part of the project structure from the outset to avoid this constraint.

5. SYNTHESIS - NEGOTIATING BETWEEN PROJECT AND RESEARCH

Using Real Time's approach as exemplar, I have proposed that Participatory Video can mediate social relationships and interactions in different ways at different stages of a research process. I have also highlighted particular challenges and risks in actual practice, such as those of inappropriate exposure, external agendas and limiting project structures. The real world is complex and contradictory and these tensions are part of operating between social interests. I therefore see Participatory Video as a way of negotiating between social possibilities and limitations in actuality. My research concern (Shaw 2012) has been to build more nuanced understanding of the tactical balances that this involves. Such nuanced practice recognises that solutions are rarely clear cut and considers contextual circumstances when deciding how to respond.

Although Real Time's methodology is but one approach to Participatory Video amongst others, the insights from exploring the specifics in context are applicable to the use of video in participatory social research more generally. In conclusion, both external commissioning agencies and those considering video as a research tool, need to understand the difference between recording video to promote internal discussion, and creating video material to be viewed externally. Action Research (e.g. Kolb 1984) involves repeated cycles of activity followed by reflection on that action, with the purpose of improving some aspect of the social world. In this sense, Participatory Video can be conceptualised as an emergent interactive process, involving iterative cycles of learning in this action research tradition, rather than a way of producing research output. Therefore, the research interactions that evolve are better perceived as akin to the ongoing conversation of ethnography, which may contribute to a research report, rather than a way of collecting data such as interviews to be delivered on video.

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