RESEARCH USING INFORMANT-MADE VIDEOS: TWO EXAMPLES

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This article reports on the use of informant-made videos as a means of collecting data for use in the study of two very different research topics: student activism and aesthetic response. Informant-made videos are video recordings that volunteer study participants create in order to document their own experiences in regard to a well-defined research question; researchers then use these recordings as the primary source of data for their research. Informants produce the recordings under the guidance of the researcher by using a "camcorder", a compact, portable, video camera normally intended for the consumer market.

Ethnographic Filmmaking

As a research approach, informant-made video is grounded in the practice and history of ethnographic filmmaking. Since the late 19th century, social scientists, such as anthropologists, have used filmmaking in the course of their study of tribal societies and ethnic groups (Brigard, 1979). Heider (1976) defines ethnographic film as an alliance of "...two ways of seeing and understanding, two strategies for bringing order to (or imposing order on) experience: the scientific and the aesthetic". The best ethnographic films bring together "the art and skills of the filmmaker with the trained intellect and insights of the ethnographer" (1976, p. ix).

Early ethnographic filmmaking has consisted mainly of documentaries produced under the full control and direction of the researcher. In these highly structured situations, the researcher or a research assistant assumes the role of camera operator. Data collected using this method of filmmaking provides documentation of the event in question recorded solely from the point of view of the researcher. Baldwin Spencer's studies of Australian aborigines (1901), and Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's six ethnographic films about the Balinese (released in 1950) are some examples of this kind of ethnographic filmmaking (Heider, 1976, p.16-42).

More recently, some ethnographers have sought to capture on film the particular point of view of their study subjects. Sol Worth and John Adair (1972) pioneered this approach by investigating the research uses of informant-made ethnographic films. In what is probably the best known example of this new, subject-centered approach, Worth and Adair began studying the culture of Navajo Indians by first training their informants in the art of filmmaking and, then, asking them to produce films about their own cultural practices. Furthering the work of

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1In 1895, Félix-Louis Regnault (assisted by Charles Comte) filmed the pottery fabrication process used by a West-African woman.
these two pioneers, Bellman and Jules-Rosette (1977) have also used informant-made films and videos during the course of their respective studies of the secular and ritual interactions within two separate African communities: the BaPestolo and the Kpelle. In addition to refining a protocol for informant-made filmmaking, Bellman and Jules-Rosette proposed useful ways in which the filmed data could be analyzed. Heider (1976) remarks that the development of informant-made films as an approach to research raises important questions about the culturally specific nature of ethnography since “ethnography has traditionally involved translation, explanation, and analysis of one culture into the idiom of another”. According to Heider, “Navajo films would be somehow ‘in Navajo’ and would therefore be the raw material for ethnography, not ethnography itself” (p. 43).

Ruby (1992) is also interested in the research uses of film and video. He argues that subject-made videos “represent an approach to documentary and ethnographic films dissimilar to dominant practice”, that they “challenge our assumptions about the nature of documentary and ethnographic films and potentially offer us insight into the role of culture in the ‘language’ of film” (p. 43).

In much the same way, participatory film and video posed a similar challenge and went through parallel developments to subject/informant-made videos. For example, the National Film Board’s Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle programs (which began in the late 1960’s) took up the question of putting film and, later on, video in the hands of communities. Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle first began in rural communities like Fogo Island, and then was extended to inner city communities, native populations and women. Challenge for Change grew from an early objective of community collaboration and participation by placing film and video technology in the hands of these communities so that they could constructively use their films as a communication, social, and political tool to evaluate community development concerns, conflict, and struggles. The development of video technology, in particular, made this prospect more realizable. Gwyn comments:

The paraphernalia of movie making — its batteries of lights, lenses, complex sound equipment — used to be as remote from most people’s lives as the moon. But the arrival of cheaper and simpler equipment — the arrival, in particular, of portable 1/2” VTR cameras, compact, relatively inexpensive and literally easy enough for an eight year old to work — means that anyone can learn to be an operator in an hour (Gwyn, 1972, p.1).

With the lofty goal of stimulating social change, filmmakers associated with Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle launched a “new concept in community development” (Gwyn, 1972, p.4-5) which demystified technology and stimulated a feeling of unity and strength (Gwyn, 1972, p.13). The process was easily adapted for informal use. For example:

[...] a community development worker spent an hour a day showing groups of citizens how to work a single Porta-pac, then told them, ‘It’s yours’ til tomorrow morning. If you need help, I’m here’. At a screening in a local church basement, at the end of the week, he found that no less than a third of Schreiber’s (an Ontario community) citizens had been in one way or another involved [...] ‘this illustrates the theory of small gains. 500 people in Schreiber had learned something about themselves’ (Gwyn, 1972, p.13).
As with informant-made videos, participatory films and videos were not about artistic prerogatives. Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle filmmakers effectively altered the relationship of filmmaker to subject, and offered the medium up as a tool of social and educational value, and placed the technology in the hands of the subject (Hénaud, 1972; Ruby, 1992).

In this paper, we provide two examples of more recent and contemporary applications of informant-made videos (IMV) in research: the use of IMV for the study of student activists' self-reflective practice and the use of IMV for the study of visitors' responses to museums objects.

Two Recent Examples of Informant-Made Video

Informant-Made Video and Research on Student Activism

In 1997, Deborah Murray used participatory film and informant-made video approaches to explore students' reflections about their role in some of the activities of the student movement. The research was undertaken after a series of actions had occurred in the Fall of 1996, in Montreal, during which college and university students protested impending government-initiated tuition fee increases. The two informants in the pilot study were asked to use informant-made video as a means to tell a story about their involvement in a specific action. It should be noted that the researcher was also a participant in the student movement and actions in the same period as the informants in this study. Consistent with approaches in participatory filmmaking, the researcher felt that this factor did not unduly influence the analysis of informants' videos, but instead added to a deeper level of understanding of the findings.

Each informant was given a brief training session on the use of a camcorder, prior to producing their own short video. One informant's video production session lasted 45 minutes. With some starts and stops in the recording, this video was produced straight through at the sight of a past action. The other informant's video was done over a 7 hour period in which the informant set up scenes in her home, and used a roughed-out script which she modified as she went along. Both informants attended an individual follow-up interview with the researcher at which time the videos were viewed and the researcher was able to ask for clarification and elaboration.

The verbal and visual data in the informants’ videos were analyzed using the academic marker method, as defined by Bellman and Jules-Rosette (1977). This allowed specific visual events to be identified and helped to contextualize the verbal data in relation to, for example, the stories being told and the informants' perspectives. Narrative analysis revealed story themes and plots, informant positions, the broader issues and strategies in the student movement, personal feelings and reflections, and insights into why student activists generally oppose government and administrative decisions concerning higher education.

In their videos, the informants revisited the events in which they participated and, in one case, the location of a past action. They were able to recall, re-enact, describe and explain...
what they were involved in and what was of most concern to them. Physical movements, such as walking with the camera, seemed relevant to highlighting visual elements and, through the process of re-enactment, it also acted as an aid to their storytelling. Both videos revealed aspects about the student movement at that time, the issues involved, the actions that each informant was involved in, and their roles in them.

In this study, the informant-made video method helped the researcher to gain some insights into the reflective period that follows student actions. Visual and verbal events together were important in conveying meaning about the events in question. However, the protocol used in this study did not allow for in-depth, comparative types of analysis such as the examinations of changes in student thinking and feeling from the time of the action to the reflective period afterwards. Therefore, it might be useful to explore using IMVs during the course of student actions, as well as afterwards, in order to uncover the deeper procedural thinking, motivation, and interpretations which could be important to understanding the links between action and changes in students' perceptions.

The experience of this study also revealed that the parameters of the video production sessions pose some problems if they are too open-ended. In the future, a more consistent approach to the video production session could ensure that the data collected lends itself to a greater comparative analysis.

Informant-Made Videos and Research on Aesthetic Understanding

In 1993, Richard Lachapelle conducted a research project in order to verify whether an approach using informant-made videos could be effective as a method of studying the aesthetic responses of adult museum visitors (Lachapelle, 1994). First, volunteer informants participated in individual training sessions on the use of the camcorder; then, they were asked to produce videotapes about two different works of art.

The study demonstrated that the informants were able to use the camcorder in order to effectively record and communicate their interpretation of specific works of art. Using discourse analysis, an analysis of the informants' video-taped commentary provided evidence that the informants' videos were as effective as the more traditional audio-taped interviews as a means of collecting verbal statements about the art objects. All informants reported that it was relatively easy to communicate their thoughts using the camcorder as a recording tool. Furthermore, the study revealed specific characteristics of the IMV approach that make it particularly suitable to certain situations where simple, aural documentation does not fully meet the requirements of a research project.

These unique characteristics of IMV pertain to the visual data contained in the informant-made videos. In this study, the video tape's visual record provided new information

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1The study was conducted using an 8mm Sony CCD-TR51 video camcorder.
2The narration of the videos was compared to the content of an audio-taped interview about two additional works of art conducted with each participant prior to the production of the video tapes.
3The traditional method for studying visitors' responses to museum exhibitions is to conduct verbal interviews with visitors as they look at various exhibits. These interviews are normally documented using an audiotape recorder.
about adults' art viewing experiences. The tapes clearly demonstrated differences in the way informants interacted with two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. Scale and physical characteristics of the works of art were also found to influence the manner in which study participants structured their art viewing experiences.

Finally, viewing the IMV recordings during follow-up interviews was found to be useful by both researcher and informants as opportunities for exploring new insights into the works of art and for clarifying the statements or images captured on the videotape.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Informant-Made Videos

Informant-made videos provide a number of advantages as a means of recording research data. In contrast to other methods of data collection, informant-made videos provide visual documentation of the object, site, or event to which the informant is referring. This makes the informant-made video recording a coherent and complete body of data that eliminates the need for field notes or other mnemonic devices to trigger researchers' recall of the event being studied.

While taping, informants spontaneously provide close-ups of those parts of the object or place to which they refer in their comments. This use of visual information to complement verbal commentary greatly reduces the chance that informant's statements will be misinterpreted. Informant-made videos automatically provide a visual recording of the informant's movements within a determined space and physical interactions with objects or exhibits.

No other single method of data collection can provide a concomitant record of the informants' discourse as well as other sources of visual information. This singular feature of informant-made videos provides a basis for multiple means of data analysis: tracking of trajectories, discourse analysis, and the study of gestures and physical relationships.

In sum, the information presented above illustrates some of the important advantages of a research protocol based on informant-made videos. These characteristics have proven to be helpful in understanding informants' self-reported experiences as student activists and museum visitors. These examples suggest that informant-made video is suitable as a research method whenever a research problem demands data collected from the point of view of the study informant.

References


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Astrid Lagounaris, professeur
Suzanne Lemerise, professeur
Josée Arsenault, étudiante à l’Université du Québec à Montréal

**Du métissage des racines**

Je dois avouer d’entrer dans cette recherche. Il demandait à être continué mouvement d’aller et de venir: sujet de cette recherche s’était dû à des projets de recherche en cours de développement. Ensuite le projet a devenir un projet intéressant et cerner cette problématique.

Depuis l’enfance j’ai eu le temps de m’identifier avec la matière. Les artistes et le passion, j’ai fait des études pour en enseigner. J’ai terminé un diplôme après, j’accouche d’un garçon et j’ai fait parvenu à vivre des instances culturelles. Je me suis placée dans le milieu. S’il n’avait pas un projet à développer, j’aurais pris la décision de continuer.

Dans le cadre d’un projet de recherche, j’ai présenté mon travail de recherche. Cette présentation a été enrichissante et m’a permis de mener ma propre recherche. J’ai découvert un sentiment de blocage en création artistique que je me suis procuré lors de ma rencontre avec Astrid Lagounaris. J’ai dû agir comme directrice pour la première fois.

Pour la première fois, je lis la thèse de recherche de Courval, Solange, *La peur de la mort*.
Comité de lecture : Francine Gagnon-Bourget
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