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'In bed with the arts...'

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Paper presented to the AHRC Beyond Text seminar series 'The Performance of Disability Histories', 2009

Introduction

In the same way that an embryo is formed, exciting and creative new things can evolve by a synergy of two things coming together. However, with new things, there is always a process of adaptation and growing pains, as the new being takes shape and form. This article will address some of the issues that arise through the synthesis and innovative nature of collaboration between visual methodologies and social research. It will draw specifically on examples from a recent research project that looked at the sex and relationship needs of young people with learning disabilities (hereafter referred to as the Sex and Relationships project), where drama was used as a research tool. It will highlight the way in which the young people in the study had their voices heard by producing a play based around their experiences and views. The article will draw the discussion together by considering the contested nature of visual methods and I will reflect on my own personal response to being a researcher on the Sex and Relationships project. Finally, I will attempt to answer the question, '...but is it really research?'

Background

'The currently emerging synthesis of the arts and social science presents challenges... (Jones, 2006)

Visual researchers have an enormous potential to be active 'in the world' beyond academics. Within social research, there has been a new wave of moving away from

text-based research, and into more reflexive ways of representing data, such as through poetry, performance, artwork, photography, film and writing. Turning to alternative methods opens up more possibilities for exploring data. Morton (1997) states:

When a modern scientist's program spews out a million data, in what sense is the problem solved? Only visualization can possibly help in comprehending such a massive output." (Morton, 1997, p. 1).

Visual methods are now being used more in education, consumer research, health/medicine, anthropology, ethnography, and participatory research and quite often the methods are interdisciplinary and collaborative/ participatory. Engagement in co-operation with others outside of our own disciplines can itself become a creative act, often stretching the boundaries of our understanding and challenging us to come up with fresh and innovative ways of overcoming practical obstacles in knowledge transfer.

Disseminating findings using visual methods goes against traditionally academically accepted forms of presenting data, and this means that some researchers find it difficult to endorse visual data as a dissemination activity. However, there are benefits to this way of working. For example, it is possible to encompass aspects of the research that would not be represented otherwise:

'...working visually involves a significant shift away from the often oddly lifeless and mechanical accounts of everyday life in textual representation, towards sociological engagements that are contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual: that live' (Halford and Knowles, 2005, p.1).

Traditional social research methods can have difficulty dealing with the sensory but Boal agrees with Halford and Knowles when he suggests that the sensory expression of ideas is just as important as verbal and written expressions:

'Words are the work and the instruments of reason: we have to transcend them and look for forms of communication which are not just rational, but also sensory- aesthetic communication...our comprehension of words is slow

because they need to be decoded, in contrast to feelings and sensations, which are immediately perceptible...' (Boal, 2006, p. 15)

Another benefit is that visual methods can be tailored to the needs of a group and can represent the views of one group to another. Added to this, these methods are a good way of giving people a voice. The application of visual methods to social research, therefore, provides potential for new, inclusive and collaborative ways of working that provide sensory and experiential products that can reach an audience beyond academia.

The use of drama as a visual method

The use of drama as a visual method is seen as a recent methodological tool in social research and, as such, has only been used by a handful of researchers (for example, see Barnardo's, 2001; Cahill, 2006, DIY Theatre Company and Goodley, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2004, to name a few). Drama can be used as a tool for disseminating data and also as a way of generating data. The advantage of using drama is that it is flexible and democratic, it develops skills and explores creativity, and it can be more inclusive and participatory. In this way, 'the research process becomes far more than merely the generation of data to be analysed and reported' (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 6). It can become a shared experience in which the research participants benefit from the creative process as well as the researcher.

Within the context of the use of drama as a visual method, Boal developed the concept of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Boal, 1979) which came from a premise of using drama as a political and empowering tool. It had at its aim, to transform society and liberate the oppressed. In this way, the process of the drama work would be as important as the end product. The end product, therefore, (usually a play) had the aim of influencing social change, while the process had the aim of empowering the participants and helping them to gain the confidence and skills to express their own issues and ideas. Boal stated that,

‘For the aesthetics of the oppressed, the most important thing is the aesthetic process which develops the perceptions of the person who practices it, though it may be very desirable that it culminates in an artistic product- the finished work of art- for its amplificatory social power.’ (Boal, 2006, p.18)

Boal also developed a practice method known as ‘Forum Theatre’. He developed this method in the 1950s and 1960s, which was designed to create a dialogue between the audience and the stage to generate discussion, initiate solutions to problems, develop community enhancement and encourage people to work together for political ends. In Forum Theatre, a scenario is acted out by the actors and then members of the audience take on some of the roles of the characters in the scenarios to act out how they would tackle the same scenario. The process of Forum Theatre therefore changes the spectators into the protagonists. Formulating theatre in this way is time-consuming but it provides a sense of well-being; a sense of group membership; a trust in the confidentiality of personal views within the group; an exhilaration at performing and a window to express their views to the outside world. Moreover, within a performance, there is a sense in which the audience does not believe the views that they see are the views of each individual actor. This means actors can gain anonymity despite the expression of their views.

The Sex and Relationships project

Goodley and Moore (2002) report the benefits of people with learning disabilities using theatre to express their views and feelings. Amongst the gains is the likelihood that people otherwise unable to express their views through language are able to express themselves through mime, movement, dance, role play, forum theatre, theatre games or through the use of sign language. This means that it extends participation to individuals who might otherwise be disabled by the research approach taken, rather than by their ability to communicate. The work of Goodley

and Moore has also pointed to the degree of involvement, joy and freedom of expression that are products of well-managed performance arts.

A recent research project the 'Sex and Relationships project' utilised some of these concepts and processes. It was a three-year project running from Jan 2007-Jan 2010, funded by the Big Lottery, designed to find out about the views and experiences of young people with learning disabilities around sex and relationships. The project adopted a number of data generation strategies, which included interviews with parents of young people with learning disabilities, a national survey of special schools and colleges, focus groups with teachers and governors and a series of drama sessions with young people with learning disabilities.

The process of using drama was a key element of the research. Twenty young people with learning disabilities, between the ages of 16 and 25 were recruited from schools and colleges in and around Leeds (UK) to take part in weekly drama sessions over the course of 2 years. The young people worked with two drama co-ordinators for twenty weeks, developing their confidence and skills in drama. Each drama session began with a 'warm-up' activity or game, to get the young people interacting with each other, focused on the session and developing some skills to boost their confidence. In early sessions, the young people started off their acting skills by producing freeze-frames of scenarios and as the weeks developed, they progressed onto miming scenarios, using shadows and adding words and props. Half way through the 20 weeks, the young people were introduced to the topic of sex and relationships, acted out scenarios about their experiences and gave their views. The information they provided was used by the Rainbow Group in Leeds (trained actors with learning disabilities) to create a play (called 'Hayley and Michael') that illustrated the views and experiences of the young people, which they performed to the young people. The young people then used the inspiration of the Rainbow Group play, and the process of Forum Theatre, as a basis to create their own play (called 'The Relationship Show'). The key messages they portrayed in the play, which had come out of their discussions in previous drama sessions, were: professionals don't listen to people with learning disabilities or take them seriously on the issue of

sex and relationships; young people with learning disabilities have nowhere to go to meet their friends; and there is not enough accessible information about relationships and sex.

In the project, visual methods were used for both the data collection process (i.e. drama sessions acting out scenarios to gain a picture of what the young people's views and experiences were) and the dissemination phase (i.e. the play). In all stages of the research people with learning disabilities were fully involved as co-researchers. This meant that all information related to the project had to be in a format that people with learning disabilities could understand (i.e. easy words and pictures). To this end an illustrator was employed on the project to add more visual rigour to the information produced and to the overall creative process.

The process of using drama as a research tool embodied elements of both practice and research. Within the drama sessions, the researcher needed to work closely with the rest of the research team, and in particular with the drama specialist to develop the research in a professional way, whilst making good use of a visual methodology. The research team found that working together as a team, and utilising each other's skills, knowledge and experience was one of the most important features in relation to the success of this project.

One of the intended outcomes of the Sex and Relationships research project was to give a voice to young people with learning disabilities so that they could inform policy. Drama was used effectively as a research tool and the young people were able to express their own views and experiences, believe in their contribution to the research, develop self-confidence, participate and communicate. The importance of giving young people a voice cannot be underestimated. Karl (1995) suggests that when people are recognised and respected for their contribution, a sense of empowerment is gained. The young people have given their experiences and views, they have developed the power to express themselves to a public audience, and they have gained extensive skills and confidence

Discussion and Conclusion

New ideas come from putting two things together. The use of visual methods can be fun, creative, playful, sensory, physical and exciting. However, it goes against the traditional methods of research which are seen as rigorous, objective, scientific and in which the text-based products are usually attributed to one author. In this way, visual methods can be contestable and controversial within the social research community.

The benefits of using visual methods include: getting the message of the research to a wider audience; communicating with people more effectively; making research more accessible to a non-academic audience; transforming the findings so that they 'come alive'; and empowering people who might not otherwise be involved in research. It also gives researchers themselves a greater visual awareness.

Even though the use of visual methods is accelerating and gaining acceptance in the sub-fields of social science, the trend remains controversial:

A central problem with a synthesis of the arts and social sciences within biographic production is epistemological; the status of new forms of production and dissemination as academic knowledge remains contested and ambiguous... (Jones, 2006, p. 67)

Doing research in this way, within a traditional social science context, involves courage and innovation. The controversial nature of this kind of research leads us to ask several questions: What data is being produced/ disseminated? How does the use of visual methods, and specifically drama, fit into a traditional definition of research as 'a systematic investigation into the study of materials, sources etc. in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions.' (Oxford Compact English Dictionary)? Can the use of drama in the Sex and Relationships project be seen as 'systematic investigation', for example? Is it valid? Is it reliable? Is it research? Is it art? Does it matter?

When I initially embarked on the journey of the Sex and Relationships project, I was excited at the prospect of using an innovative methodology. The use of drama was 'backed up' by other, more traditional research methods, such as interviews, focus groups and surveys. As such, this offered an element of triangulation and gave rigour and validity to the process that made the visual/ creative element more 'acceptable' to the academic community and to the funders.

It was difficult to be precise about the responses of the young people within the drama sessions. For example, there might be two young people who would say something and other people (who might have difficulty in speaking) would smile or nod, rather than speak. This will be the case in any discussion group and particularly with people with learning disabilities who find language difficult and who are participating in drama sessions, rather than discussions sessions. This meant that, quite often, there was no accurate measure of how many of the young people spoke or what, exactly, they were saying. The research team needed to embody an element of interpretation. This was done by building up good relationships with the young people over two years and analysing in detail the videoed sessions.

The importance of using drama was in getting an impression, of what was said in general rather than in detailed, accurate data. The advantage of using drama in the research project was that people with learning disabilities were able to give *some* response, where they might not have been able to give *any* response using other research methods. The response they gave was from themselves as individuals. If the project had used more traditional methods of research, some of the young people might have needed support workers to understand written or verbal communication (e.g. surveys/ interviews etc). If people with learning disabilities answered questions with a support worker present, their answers might not always have been what they wanted to say, or they might have said what they thought the support worker would want them to say. For such a sensitive subject as sex and relationships, a respondent might not want a support worker around.

The interesting thing has been in the way in which the findings of the drama work were backed up by what the parents and teachers said and what came out of the survey results. It was important to have all four parts of the research so that an accurate, overall picture of the findings could be generated. The drama element added rich qualitative data that highlighted key areas of importance to the young people.

As two things synergise, this can create growing pains. Before the Sex and Relationships project I had been steeped in more traditional forms of research methods (but had a personal interest in the arts), so I learnt a great deal from the 'freeing up' process of using drama as a research tool. The drama coordinators learnt more about the process of planning research and the process of recording and analysing the data in a systematic way, comparing and contrasting themes and categories to come to an agreement of the overall findings.

When using visual methods, there is potential for the researcher to synergise more with the research and enter the world of the participants, in this way, gaining a greater insight into the lives of those being studied. The researcher also builds up closer relationships with the participants because the visual process becomes shared. Using visual methods can be seen as lacking objectivity and rigour by some social researchers who remain embedded within a purely scientific model. However, I would argue that the process of the Sex and Relationships project was indeed research since it followed a systematic investigation into the study of a topic (sex and relationships) in order to establish key points and reach new conclusions. It was also art, since it was creative and organic. It was innovative. It was experimental. It had an impact on all those who participated, including myself, since the creative process was shared and experiential. It may not have been completely rigorous and precise, but it had a refreshing, new form of itself that engaged people with learning disabilities in a way that could not have happened using traditional methods.

Using visual methods can help researchers to tap into a more emotional response:

‘By rethinking our relationships with communities and across disciplines such as the arts and humanities, we are presented with opportunities to move beyond imitation of ‘scientific’ reports in dissemination of our work and look towards means of (re)presentation that embrace the humanness of social science pursuits...presentations can then evolve into ways of creating meaningful local encounters and performances...’ (Jones, 2006, p. 67)

From a personal point of view, I would argue that it is only through the experiential nature of visual methods that a researcher can work in an innovative way with data and push the boundaries of his/ her own self reflection. This reflexivity would not be possible using more traditional methods. However, it is this personal, emotive, sensory response that is often what researchers fear.

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