Creating participatory video with communities

Written by Paul Cooke (University of Leeds)

Prof. Paul Cooke is Centenary Chair at the Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures at University of Leeds, and Principal Investigator of Changing The Story. In this short blog, he outlines how his previous work in using participatory video with young people has led to the development of the Changing the Story project, sharing examples of his work and insights into some of Changing The Story's sister projects in Nepal and Kenya.

Participatory Video at University of Leeds

Over the last few years, the Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures has been working with colleagues from across the University of Leeds on a series of participatory video projects. These began as Arts and Humanities Research Council 'Follow-on-funding' projects, designed to help maximise the impact of our work exploring the legacy of Germany's totalitarian history for Europe today:

They also considered the global impact of the Holocaust and the ways in which it can be used to inform human rights education:

How humanities research is contributing to development through the Global Challenges Research Fund

More recently our work has led to a series of GCRF projects. Much of this has fed directly into the thinking of the Changing the Story project, where we have focussed on the power of participatory video specifically, as well as participatory arts more generally, as tools to support often vulnerable young people to advocate for change in their lives. Central to this has been our work with the South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation and with the NGOs the Bishop Simeon Trust and Themba Interactive, who support vulnerable young people in Townships around Ekurhuleni in South Africa:

This aspect of our work continues to grow, most recently leading to our involvement in a training project for teachers across Kenya, as the country seeks to respond to the challenge of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to put greater emphasis on 'creativity' in the education of young people. This work will be the subject of a future blog.

Combatting health issues through participatory video in Nepal

Members of HERD International and public health professional Dr. Caroline Tait try out the filmmaking audio equipment for the first time.

Over the last few weeks we've also begun an exciting new project that has taken our work in a very different direction. CARAN (Community Arts for Resistant Antibiotics in Nepal) is a partnership between the Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures, University of Leeds' Nuffield Centre, Nepal's HERD International and the Nepalese Ministry of Health. Its aim is to use participatory arts to raise awareness at community level of the consequences of antibiotic misuse and the resistance (ABR) this is generating – a major public health issue for the country. In doing so, our project also aims to support communities to explain to policy makers what they understand to be the drivers and barriers to addressing antibiotic resistance locally. We'll be working with two communities: an urban community living in a slum in Kathmandu and a rural, farming community living in the outskirts of the city.

We are still in the development stage of this project and have just returned from a fascinating week working with our Nepalese partners. This involved visiting the rural community we will be working with and also beginning the process of developing the project manual we will be using to deliver a series of workshops, during which we will train members of the community both to become documentary filmmakers and facilitators of community discussions about antibiotic misuse, using the World Health Organisation guidelines and the Nepali antibiotic resistance strategy as a creative stimulus for their films.

So far CARAN has been a wonderful example of how interdisciplinary can allow people both to play to their disciplinary strengths and yet develop an innovative approach to an established research problem. The disciplinary expectations of public health are very different to those of participatory video. All participants have engaged in a detailed process of negotiation, where every member of the team has had to continually re-evaluate what they consider to be the core purpose of the project. Initially, I thought that this was going to be very similar to work I'd undertaken previously. The community would define how they wanted to engage with the topic and this would change with each group we worked with. There would be little need for a detailed 'manual' and the project would develop iteratively in response to the creative direction the groups wished to go in. This, I think it's fair to say, made our colleagues in public health somewhat nervous. They were particularly concerned that an entirely community-led filmmaking process could lead to the spread of misinformation about ABR. They also initially saw the project primarily as about data-collection on attitudes to ABR, rather than about how film can generate advocacy.

Through detailed discussion, where everyone involved was very keen both to see the collaboration work, and also to ensure that their core disciplinary values were maintained, we developed a working method that we feel will genuinely bring something new to the discussion about the role of participatory arts within public health. Through the use of film, we hope that the project will genuinely provide new research insights, foregrounding the specific cultural barriers to antibiotic misuse within specific communities that are not generally engaged in policy development. Our project will provide a way of engaging communities on their own terms, while also ensuring that the project is rooted in an understanding of the facts about ABR. This, in turn, will allow us to develop a case study in the

specific value of participatory video in public health campaigns. At the same time, we will also investigate how social science methodologies can work together with arts practice to engage policy makers. In so doing, it will also discuss the thorny issue of 'scalability', exploring the value of 'micro' knowledge in a world of 'big data'. Key to our thinking in this project has been a reflection on the nature of 'equitable partnerships' within a participatory project, where all members of the team, from public health specialist to filmmaker to community participant understand why they want to participate in the project, what they bring to the table in terms of expertise and what they hope to gain from it. Have a look at our first film, to get more of a flavour of what we hope to achieve.

To find out more about the Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures and for more information about Changing The Story's sister projects taking place across the world, contact us.

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