Participatory Video as a Catalyst for Informal Learning and Expression: A Review of a PV Training in Uganda, 2012

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ABSTRACT

Previously, video production was a skill set practiced by trained individuals, but new technologies have opened the doors so that anyone can be a filmmaker. This paper explores the history and conceptual foundations of participatory video (PV), and offers a reflective perspective on its applicability as a teaching and learning tool. A review of a PV training in Uganda is featured to highlight the methodology used in practice and the challenges faced. The authors propose that an approach to PV which combines the best existing practices with a closer alignment to its foundational principles is worthy of further research.

In his study *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins (2009) writes, "We are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced" (p. 12). Participatory video (PV), a technique used with increasing frequency in education and development, can act as a unique catalyst for learning and expression. The underlying principles of PV are also congruent with the vision of many theorists who sought to develop alternatives to the dominant educational paradigm; in particular, Freire (1970), who differentiated between the "banking" model of teaching and problem-posing education.

The prevalence and low cost of media production devices today poses an interesting opportunity to educators, both formal and non-formal. Previously, video production was a skill set practiced by a few highly trained individuals, but new technologies have opened the doors so that anyone can be a filmmaker. This makes video production ideal for integration into what is known as participatory culture. Jenkins (2009) explains, "A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" (p. xi). Applying the principles of participation to the process of video production is the defining characteristic of participatory video. Walker (2013) makes the point that video production "requires critical thinking, teamwork, and engagement. This process is what makes video production such a profound and transformative experience for participants. At once, they become storytellers, activists, and creators of knowledge and information" (p. 99).

PV is a technique in which trained educators teach storyboarding, framing, camera operation, and other basic video-making skills to an enthusiastic group of participants. The principles and methods of PV have been most widely applied in activism, education, and development (Walker, 2013). Although no rigid methodology for PV exists, and often projects are context specific, there is a growing body of literature on the successes and common challenges faced around the world by PV facilitators and the communities they work with. High, Singh, Petheram, and Nemes (2012) state, "The freedom to innovate and develop one's own ideas about participatory video is an important part of the tradition" (p. 45). The importance of context-specific flexibility is consistent with the approach of Freire (1982), who asserts that an educational program "cannot be something static." He further argues that "one cannot regard a program abstractly and metaphysically—it was created as a result of reality and has to be changed, dependent on the reality" (p. 36). Indeed, this raises questions about the scalability and capacity for replication that are of significant importance to educational curricula and development practices alike.

A Brief History and Review of PV

Often the origins of PV are traced back to the Fogo Island Communication Experiment. Between 1967 and 1968, filmmakers from the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change program made over 26 short films on Fogo Island, off the coast of Newfoundland. A government relocation program threatened the

isolated population of the 300 year-old settlements, and the films were used for horizontal communication between residents with the goal of facilitating organization towards collective action (Corneil, 2012). According to Corneil,

> the Fogo Method, as it came to be known, began as an experiment in ethical documentary, and many of the principles developed within this early experimental stage remain core principles in methodologies of participatory video as it is still practiced today. (p. 25)

At present, participating in a PV project is part of the process of acquiring new media literacies. Jenkins (2009) characterizes the new media literacies as "social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply as individualized skills to be used for personal experience" (p. 32). These interactions are what make participatory video more than just a transfer of technical skills, whether in the context of education, development, or social action. As reflected in the video accompanying this paper, the requisite basic technical skills for planning and shooting a video can be acquired quite easily. Although the video highlights a case from the development context involving adults, the same can be expected from youth in a classroom or a non-formal setting.

PV and Development

Beyond the technical aspects of participatory video lie the transformative elements of the process. In the context of development, this change can be expressed as greater empowerment through the creation and ownership of knowledge and information, an increase in critical thought, and an increase in civic engagement. In their handbook entitled *Insights Into Participatory Video*, Nick and Chris Lunch (2006) frame PV as "a tool for positive social change … a means of empowerment for the marginalized and … a process that encourages individuals and communities to take control of their destinies" (p. 4). Perceiving such qualitative changes often poses a challenge to organizations accustomed to dealing with quantitative assessments, as is frequently the case in the development world so often constrained by project timelines and donor-established outcomes. Therefore, development organizations often emphasize the immediately tangible benefits of community-generated media, specifically the final products themselves, and their utility in vertical communication. Regarding this point, Lunch and Lunch (2006) note that, "the films can be used to communicate the situation and ideas of local people to development workers and formal researchers, and to decision-makers and policymakers" (p. 13). Furthermore, community-created media content has a certain resonance with donor agencies that

are given an opportunity to see the reality of their project sites from the point of view of their program "beneficiaries." This makes PV particularly useful as a fundraising tool. A collective community voice is especially vital to development agencies applying appreciative inquiry principles to their project planning, and PV can be remarkably effective in this regard.

In addition to vertical communication, the media created by participatory video can be readily shared horizontally from peer to peer or community to community. Lunch and Lunch (2006) note that PV films can be used in a

> community-to-community exchange to spread ideas, and to encourage and inspire. [The films] may even be relevant to communities in other countries with similar conditions and problems. PV can thus enhance the capacity of people to share their local knowledge and innovations across distances and to stimulate locally-led development in other countries. (p. 13)

These various uses highlight the multifaceted nature of archival media. A village drama, on the other hand, which can employ many of the same participatory principles in its production, is expressed only at the site where it is performed. The output of PV as a digital, easily shareable medium means the legacy of a single project has communication potential far beyond its place of origin.

As expected, participatory video can fit neatly within the dominant framework of communication for development, in which a people-centered approach is applied to a development initiative with the intention of encouraging the people to implement a certain plan. However, in reference to that approach, Quarry and Ramirez (2009) question whose plan is actually being promoted. They advocate an alternative framework, one in which communication media

> can be used to help people facilitate their own discussion of their own predicament leading to their own plan of action. This implies a much more people-centred and bottom-up approach that will not necessarily fit into an overall plan prepared by others. This, in fact, suggests *another* approach to development. (p. 21)

PV and Education

In the context of teaching and learning, many of the same external benefits of PV can be applied, such as the usefulness of created media in vertical (students to

teachers or administrators, or members of the community at large) and horizontal (peer to peer, class to class, or school to school) communication. The internal, and perhaps more abstract concepts put forth by Freire, such as conscientization, have more relevance among educators than they do for development practitioners. Freire (1970) emphasizes the role of communication in education when he states,

> Only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. (p. 77)

Indeed, the self-reflection and critical inquiry that can accompany a participatory video production are in accord with Freire's aforementioned problem-posing educational paradigm, a process which allows men and women to

> develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (p. 83)

Some educators may possess a measure of skepticism regarding the utility of participatory video in a formal classroom setting. Again, if the focus is on the media outputs of a project, then its benefits only go as far as the participants' (and educators') vision for the exhibition and dissemination of the video, much like the model dominant in development. If, on the other hand, educators were to apply the process-based principles of Freire, they would then see the media outputs as secondary to the participatory video exercise. Media production is, in itself, problem-posing education. Jenkins (2009) speaks directly to this point in the greater context of formal education and the new media technologies:

> Historically, we have valued creative writing or art classes not only because they help to identify and train future writers and artists, but also because the creative process is valuable on its own; every child deserves the chance to express him- or herself through words, sounds, and images, even if most will never write, perform, or draw professionally. Having these experiences, we believe, changes the way youths think about themselves and alters the way they look at work created by others. (p. 6)

Some Challenges

In the preceding sections, participatory video has been described as a set of principles rather than a methodological praxis. This presents a number of challenges to both development practitioners and educators alike. What happens when these principles are not adhered to? Without robust methodological processes, many teachers and development actors, who often have diverse responsibilities and expertise, will be unable to make the ad hoc decisions and adjustments required to ensure that true participation is taking place. Tamara Plush (2012) argues, "Development projects often adhere to tested theories and methodologies, but participatory video is often brought into these initiatives without the necessary rigor in design or implementation" (p. 67).

A comprehensive review of the literature conducted by Low, Rose, Salvio, and Palacios (2012) reveals many similar challenges. They assert, however, that the overall scholarship on the subject has not kept up with the increased utilization of participatory video fieldwork, either with regard to development work or research. They conclude that

> the majority of … publications describe the benefits of the method and therefore tend to be celebratory and uncritical, failing to address the difficulties that arise in theorizing the need for participatory video projects and research, accepting funding for them, and conducting and disseminating them. (p. 50)

This brief review has discussed some of the major theoretical challenges surrounding PV, particularly at the intersection of theory and practice. Because of the context-specific nature of participatory video, each project will face its own practical challenges based on the local conditions and realities under which it is initiated. A summary of these will be outlined in the following section, which discusses a PV training of trainers (ToT) and their initial attempt at facilitating PV with a community.

Click here for video

Training of Trainers: Katakwi, Uganda

Communities throughout Africa have a rich oral tradition of storytelling and public theatre to pass important messages around villages and across generations. With this strong tradition, oral and visual forms of communication are the most effective way for community members to engage and teach each other. Traditionally, however, this form of communication in the most rural areas has been predominantly restricted to "live" versions due to limited access to modern forms of mass media such as television, film, radio, and so forth. (Mushengyezi, 2003). In more recent years, though, typical barriers to their uptake such as cost and availability of these technologies, have been drastically reduced.

In 2010 the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre partnered with the Ethiopian Red Cross Society to support members of a women's group in Wage Wargaje through the PV process. Members of this group chose to develop a film documenting the many benefits of using a fuel-efficient cook stove in the household, with the aim of increasing the adoption of the stoves being promoted by the women's group (Benn, 2011). Despite initial fears of operating the cameras and the unfamiliar nature of developing a film, members of the women's group quickly learned how to use the new technology and embraced its advantages in sharing information. After the film's completion, it was initially shown to 80 community members from five *Kebeles*[1] near Wage Wargaje. After these screenings, the members of the Wage Wargaje women's group were interviewed and together they suggested three key advantages of film documentation over their more traditional forms of oral communication. First, video is more memorable than traditional forms of oral communication. Second, video can document and show evidence of the key messages they wanted to pass along, such as decreased smoke exposure. They concluded that this visual documentation provides more credibility than oral communication alone. Finally, they agreed that video could be a medium to help spread their message to a much larger audience as well as to audiences in distant places (Castro, 2011).

Catalyzed by the high level of satisfaction expressed by the women's group in Wage Wargaje, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre organized a subsequent PV training in Katakwi, Uganda in 2012. This training of trainers (ToT) event was targeted toward highly experienced, community level officers from eight partner organizations. Partners were selected based on their involvement in the Partners for Resilience (PfR) alliance,[2] a five-year collaboration in nine countries among five lead organizations: the Netherlands Red Cross, Cordaid, CARE, Wetlands International, and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre. Representatives from these organizations

and their local partners came from four countries in Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Mali.

During this five-day training, representatives were taught the basics of storyboarding, video camera operation, framing, and editing. Trainees were also taught basic elements of the visual language of filmmaking such as how filming with low and high angle shots can show power and weakness, respectively, of the subject, as well as the meaning of various field sizes and interviewing angles. More complicated techniques such as depth of field, manual focus, and lighting were not covered. While these basic skills are important for all PV facilitators to possess, more critically, representatives also learned how to teach these skills to others. The PV process centers on the pivotal recognition that communities can document and create their own narratives with minimal outside support.

Once trainees were sufficiently comfortable with the hard and soft skills of PV, they traveled to Ongongoja, a remote village in Katakwi District, to meet with a community risk reduction team (CRRT) supported by the Uganda Red Cross Society. Trainees now took on the role of training facilitators and handed the cameras over to the community members, who began to experiment with them. Members of the Ogongoja risk reduction team also experienced initial trepidation in using the filming equipment, similar to the women's group in Wage Wargaje. This was quickly overcome, however, and members experimented with varied lighting and sound situations, as well as inventive local special effects developed to improve the narratives of their stories. They also received guidance from the PV ToT trainees in regard to the basics of framing and storyboarding, though the more detailed aspects of camera angles and field sizes were not covered due to time constraints.

Experienced field officers are quite comfortable interacting with community members and leaders in diverse settings; nevertheless, being asked to step out of their typical leadership role and hand over complete control to the community can be challenging for some. In the case of this PV ToT, however, handing over control to the community did not present significant challenges, especially for those with limited prior film experience. It is the belief of the authors that the shared learning experience of the ToT trainees and the community members helped to facilitate this process. Many of the PV ToT trainees viewed the PV process as an innovative and refreshing approach to interacting with community members.

PV in the Community

The technical aspects of the filming process are only half of the PV story, and not the most critical piece. It is the softer side of the PV process that is most important; it allows community members to interact collectively in new ways with one another and with their civil society partners. When carried out correctly, PV can be the moment when actions speak instead of words, and community members learn that they are truly in control of the message that will be projected to others about themselves, whether within the community or externally.

In terms of working together, collaboration is an important aspect of community life in a rural setting; this PV training also provided the opportunity for community members to experience collaboration with one another in new ways. For example, one element of the PV exercise is that all members must gain experience both as director and as camera operator. In their World Bank report entitled *Gender and Economic Growth in Uganda*, Ellis, Manuel, and Blackden (2006), emphasize the fact that the local culture has strong, customary male-dominated gender roles. The type of collaboration intrinsic to PV provides a unique opportunity for traditional women to take a directorial role. In a few cases it was clearly seen that women who were otherwise quiet and reserved became noticeably engaged and confident when in the role of director or camera operator, though some initially needed extra encouragement from facilitators to feel comfortable.

After only a day and a half of learning how to storyboard, use camera equipment, and experiment with filming techniques, community members, who had never held a video camera before, became filmmakers. With the help of the PV trainees the films were given a final round of edits and were screened at a local school for the community at large. An excerpt of one of the screened films is shown in *PV Training In Uganda* produced by Walker (2012). Although a thorough PV process would involve a longer community engagement period, for example Lunch and Lunch (2006) suggest 12 days, the ToT nature of the training limited the available community interaction time to a day and a half. Despite the limited time, the rapid adoption of these skills speaks to the accessibility of basic filmmaking techniques and technology. It is the authors' belief that the rich culture of storytelling and public theatre found in Uganda, as a means of communication between communities and generations, greatly contributed to the ease with which filmmaking skills were adopted.

Facilitators Return Home

Following that screening, the PV trainees officially became PV facilitators and returned to their home countries to facilitate the PV process in additional communities in West and East Africa. Malik Adan of Kenya Red Cross notes in the film, *PV Training in Uganda*:

> It came out very clear that the community now will be empowered … in our place with the skills of video taking. They can take whatever they want. That can be used for policy, horizontal and vertical communication, from peer to peer and also for policy makers to help the community. (Walker, 2012)

Upon returning to Kenya, Malik trained community risk reduction groups in PV. They chose to develop films to document trainings and key aspects of their chosen risk reduction activities. As these activities are documented, films can be developed and used to teach local government officials and other community-based organizations about those activities. In the long run, videos of trainings can also be used to refresh key skills of community risk reduction team members, or to give a basic introductory training to new members (S. Temesgen, personal communication, February 11, 2013).

In Uganda, CARE trained an additional 13 staff of local partners as well as 25 community members. During this training, participants created a film called *Environmental Conservation: Our Responsibility*, which highlights the dangers of tree cutting, charcoal burning, and bush burning. This film was screened for community members at large, raising awareness about local risks, and increasing interest in the development of further PV films (M. Anguparu, personal communication, February 14, 2013).

In Mali, Wetlands International trained community members from Noga Village in the PV process. Trainees chose to develop their first film on their reforestation work in the Niger River Delta to help decrease desertification and strong wind gusts in their community. The film features a risk reduction team meeting to organize their tree-planting plan and proceeds into shots of the actual tree-planting process (IUCN, 2012). This film was shown to 130 community members to raise awareness in the community about the reforestation project and its benefits (F. Sadio, personal communication, February 18, 2013). It can also be used to promote the work of the community when the risk reduction team meets with local authorities and civil society organizations.

Even with increasing access to technology, however, a number of challenges still remain and have been documented in the year following the participatory video training. Despite the relative affordability of a basic video camera, another partner in Uganda had equipment stolen early on in the process and was unable to replace it (N. Abdul, personal communication, January 31, 2013). A partner in Mali noted that while the cheaper equipment was more accessible, it meant sacrificing a lot in terms of video quality, which was not desirable within his organization and the communities he supports (F. Sadio, personal communication, February 18, 2013).

While traditional cost and access barriers are decreasing in relation to video cameras, other challenges at the community level were cited by facilitators such as a lack of power, the need for a computer to edit the films, and a television or large laptop to screen them (M. Anguparu, personal communication, February 14, 2013). These challenges are also consistent with some of those documented by Baumhardt, Lasage, Suarez, and Chadza (2009) during their PV work in Malawi with the Malawi Red Cross Society.

One prevailing challenge also observed by the authors is the limited ability to provide follow-up support to PV ToT participants and communities at large. Because of resource constraints, organizations typically hire outside consultants to facilitate PV trainings rather than having in-house PV experts. This lack of in-house expertise and the competing day-to-day pressures and priorities of the larger project management cycle, into which PV activities are integrated, limits the capacity of organizations to provide additional follow-up support after the core interaction of the PV process has concluded. These internal pressures can also inhibit critical supervisory staff from adopting this methodology, which suggests the need for stronger champions within institutions, as well as longer-term relationships with PV experts.

A Different Approach

There is a need to evaluate what is meant by the PV process, and by extension, when this process comes to a conclusion. The process described by Lunch and Lunch (2006) is designed to facilitate insider-to-outsider communication, and a screening with the community is held more on principle rather than in a genuine effort to deeply reflect upon the issues documented in the film. Their approach places a clear emphasis on the value of the video production process itself in order to achieve the wider goals of horizontal and vertical communication, and merits praise for this dimension.

Others such as Digital Green, an India-based NGO, put significantly more emphasis on the post-production screening of the participatory videos and corresponding mediated discussions within farming communities, led by local community members. In their study of Digital Green's methods, Gandhi, Veeraraghavan, Toyama, and Ramprasad (2007) assert that films should be screened to exhaustion in an effort to reach wider audiences and increase farmer participation. They argue that this approach provides an important opportunity for community members not involved in the film production process to give feedback and verification of the videos, while also creating space for farmers to share their experiences testing and adopting new agricultural techniques introduced by government extension officers. Digital Green's mediated screening sessions offer a dynamic not present in the Lunch and Lunch approach; however, these screenings present unidirectional agricultural extension innovations, thereby facilitating outsider-to-insider communication.

An approach combining the salient features of the two above PV paradigms, production focused and screening focused, into a lengthier and more reflective process of insider-to-insider communication, is worthy of development and research. Indeed, such an integrated paradigm would be more congruent with the theoretical framework of Paulo Freire's education as the practice of freedom, as well as Quarry and Ramirez's "*another* development."

Conclusions

Participatory video creates the space for alternative and more collaborative forms of teaching and learning than those found in typically traditional educational or development interventions. In the development setting, in particular, PV allows communities to drive the narratives of their own stories in order to target messages to the key stakeholders they wish to reach.

Although, in the context of the PV training of trainers featured in this paper, there is insufficient data to support the argument that conceptual themes such as conscientization occur among PV participants—indeed, it was not one of the goals of the exercise—it, nevertheless, is a significant dimension of the process. The emphasis that development agencies place on quantitative and tangible results in the short term may make it difficult for them to recognize this important outcome of PV. Educators, however, both formal and non-formal, are not bound by these constraints, and have greater freedom to incorporate PV into their curricula. To educators, the Katakwi

PV training can, at the very least, serve as an example of the simplicity and ease with which people can adopt and use new technologies. As stated, today anyone can be a filmmaker. It is the hope of the authors that the merits of the principles behind participation speak for themselves.

Acknowledgments

The authors of this paper would like to acknowledge the Partners for Resilience alliance, funded by the Dutch Government (DGIS), for organizing and supporting the PV training of trainers in Katakwi, Uganda. The authors would also like to extend sincere gratitude to Justin Benn, Pablo Suarez, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, and the PV trainees for their continued support and dedication to PV. Thanks also to the Uganda Red Cross Society for logistical support and to the community in Ogongoja for learning along with us.

Notes

1. The smallest administrative unit found in Ethiopia.

2. More information on the Partners for Resilience alliance can be found at: http://www.partnersforresilience.nl

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