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Reflexive strategies developed during part-time field work in an English school for the blind, Worcester, 2000-2001

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SAGE Research Methods Case Education Submission for Consideration

Case Title

Reflexive strategies developed during part-time field work in an English school for the blind, Worcester, 2000-2001

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Keywords

Blind, visual impairment, art education, disability, special needs, exclusion, grounded theory, participant diaries, informer

Relevant Disciplines

Education, Special Needs, Sociology, Disability Studies, Visual Art

Methods Used

Grounded theory / methodology, open interviews, participant diaries, participant observations

Academic Level

Final year undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral, post-doctoral researcher

Contributor Biography

Simon Hayhoe completed his part-time PhD at Birmingham University in 2005, under the supervision of Professors John Hull & Ruth Watts. Simon previously taught in schools in London, Worcestershire and Leicestershire.

Simon has also taught at undergraduate and postgraduates level at Sharjah Women's College, UAE, and at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. He was also Program Director of the MA Special Needs & Inclusion and Coordinator of the Ed.D. Special Educational Needs at Canterbury.

Simon is now a lecturer in the Department of Education, Bath University.

In addition to his full-time roles, Simon has held numerous honorary academic posts. Most notably, Simon has been a Centre Research Associate in the Centre for the Philosophy of Natural & Social Science, London School of Economics, UK, since 2012.

Whilst at Leicester Grammar School, Simon won a Fulbright Scholar's Award to fund a Fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US.

Link to the Research Output

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/researchAndExpertise/Experts/profile.aspx?KeyValue=s.hayhoe@lse.ac.uk>

Abstract

In 1999, I embarked on a part-time Ph.D. study to examine the effects of early art education on cultural development in English schools for the blind. This study formed

part of a larger grounded theory on the understanding and creation of what are thought to be the visual arts by blind adults and children.

The main fieldwork for this study was conducted at RNIB New College, Worcester, and included participant observations, interviews and participant diaries.

This article examines strategies involved in developing fieldwork as a full-time teacher in a different school, and focuses on the issues involved in collecting the participant diaries.

The article also examines the development, creation and maintenance of relationships within fieldwork, and strategies of reflexive work patterns. In particular, the article examines the nature of the Intimate Journal and the use of Informers to develop part of a grounded theory.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the case study, students should:

- Have a better understanding of conducting research with disabled students and special schools;
- Understand the role of relationship-building in developing fieldwork;
- Be able to examine the role of a part-time researcher working independently;
- Be able to assess the pros and cons of initiating field work for a grounded theory.

Project overview and context: The visual art education of blind students

In many Western countries, what was considered to be visual art was generally not taught to blind students until the latter years of the twentieth century - as the nature of art education was felt to be largely two-dimensional, there had been widespread exclusion of blind students from this subject in schools for the blind in particular (Hayhoe, 2016).

In England & Wales, the widespread inclusion of blind children in visual art education was only legally mandated after implementation of the 1988 Education Act (Hayhoe, 2005, 2016). Consequently, little research on blind students in visual arts education had been published at the end of the last millennium, and little training on inclusion had been given to art teachers (Hayhoe, 2012, 2008, 2016).

A few years into my teaching career, I designed a part-time Ph.D. study to research the issue of art education in schools for the blind through Birmingham University, UK. This study was part of a larger grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which had begun its first phase of study in 1993 (Hayhoe, 1995, 2000, 2008, 2012).

The fieldwork for this second phase of research was based at RNIB New College, Worcester - a school for the blind in the English West Midlands – and data collection was to be a combination of participant observations of art classes, interviews with the students and teachers, and students' participant diaries (Hayhoe, 2005, 2008, 2012).

The following article describes my identification of RNIB New College, my development of the part-time fieldwork and practical issues that I encountered in doing so. The article also examines the way I attempted to share ownership of the participant diaries with the school, the teachers involved and the students.

I will finish this article by drawing conclusions and asking further questions about the efficacy and development of such fieldwork methodologies.

Identifying the institution, teachers and students

My first practical research decision was the nature of the data and the identification of a suitable institution. This also led me to choose to present my research as a series of case studies using largely oral data collection, observations, diaries and photographic observation.

The analysis of this data was to be based on reports created from school visits, individual students' recollections of art projects and academic tasks. I then planned to conduct follow-up interviews with students and teachers as and when necessary. This process was designed to supplement the restricted participant observations I was

forced to accept, as my post as a full-time teacher allowed little time for field work in other schools.

I felt that the adoption of verbal reports and interviews was the most practical course of action for two primary reasons:

- The first reason was, during previous research I found that I got almost as much data from reports and interviews as I did from observations (Hayhoe, 1995, 2000, 2008). Although qualitatively important, I also found that reports and interviews became a filtered source of observations and a firmer basis for the hypotheses that followed.
- My second reason was my belief in the democratisation of the data collection. This process allowed all my participants to play a role in the process and guide the themes and narratives that were collected (Hayhoe, 2012).

In addition to designing practical strategies for fieldwork, I also wanted my research to be centred on ethics. Disability was an ethically contentious topic at the beginning of the millennium, and my research featured a social group who were under-represented in academia and society as a whole. This had earlier led to the phrase “nothing about us, without us” becoming the rallying cry of the disability rights movement in many Western democracies (Charlton, 1998).

I had previously experienced disability politics in 1994 whilst gathering information for my M.Ed. study at Leicester University (Hayhoe, 2012). At the time, a great deal of controversy was caused by a local organisation, the Disability Coalition, protesting against research in the arts centre I was working in. I adapted future research to reflect this attitude.

The controversy that resulted from protests by the Disability Coalition was mainly the result of the research centre's profile, and its connection with the film star and director, Richard Attenborough. After which, the resulting furore taught me that passively conducting research independently of the social group that it was designed to benefit, benefitted no one but the researchers themselves.

When initially identifying a suitable institution for my Ph.D. fieldwork, I considered finding a school close to my then home in London, but had few contacts in the area. I then considered using only the Web, which would allow me to maintain contacts with distant schools. This method was also rejected as the Web was not universal at the time, and many schools were reluctant to use it in this way. Its use also seemed impersonal.

This problem was eventually resolved when I moved jobs to a school in Worcestershire, near RNIB New College, Worcester. This was a college that I had previous contact with.

During my M.Ed. study, between 1993-1995, I had built a productive working relationship with an executive officer at RNIB headquarters. This officer was responsible for overseeing New College. I had become familiar with this school because it had a unique history in this form of education, and it had high status as a government beacon school. I was also previously aware of the role that New College had as a training school for Birmingham University.

The principal of New College granted permission for my study after an initial request, although he let me know that he was soon to be leaving the school. Consequently, I was referred as a point of contact firstly to the existing principal's personal assistant, and then afterwards to the head of art.

Initial meetings with the head of art

Following my initial approaches over a period of several months, I managed to secure the co-operation of the head of art at New College in late 2000. In this study, I called this teacher Gerard to protect his identity. After an initial analysis of the organisation, I also decided that Gerard would make a good Informer during this section of the study.

The concept of the Informer, although sometimes associated with police informants, is defined primarily by ethnographic researchers as a go-between or intermediary. Moreover, the Informer is to provide a point of contact for the researcher with the culture or institution the he or she is studying (Hayhoe, 2012).

My model of the Informer was that of Hammersley (1984), in his earlier study of a Manchester grammar school. In this study, Hammersley described how he used a main member of staff in the grammar school to pick the most helpful participants - in common with ethnographic researchers at the time, Hammersley referred to participants as "actors," although I found this an offensive term to use in my analyses.

In his study, Hammersley also described how he used his Informer to provide a trusted face in the school, as he was a researcher with relatively unknown aims who had no previous connection with the institution. This lack of connection meant that he did not have the necessary kudos with students that an established teacher already working in the school could provide.

I scheduled an initial meeting with Gerard on a Tuesday evening, as this was his duty time, and he had to stay until seven at night to check children in and out of study rooms. Subsequent Tuesdays thus provided regular opportunities to conduct further meetings and interviews.

Fortuitously, Gerard's duty task became ideal for meeting other staff and students, as he often had to remain in the staff-room close to the school's central administration offices. Thus, the staff room had the advantage of being the most identifiable point in the school, and the main congregational centre for staff to work individually and relax.

I began my first meeting with Gerard by explaining the scope, purpose, nature, methodology and ethical considerations of the study (Hayhoe, 2012) – although when I conducted this research, and in common with many British universities at the time, Birmingham University's Faculty of Education had no ethics committee I was aware of – I had certainly not been instructed to report to it, if it did exist. Research ethics was still an embryonic subject of discussion in this era.

Gerard also explained two issues that concerned him. His first issue was that the school was undergoing political changes, and any personal opinions made by him or his colleagues, if published in a report, could cause problems. The second issue was

that, on a practical level, Gerard was genuinely concerned about the time that he would have to devote to the study.

Our meeting also reviewed the sampling of students and speedy communication strategies of future meetings. Gerard felt that it was practical to gather participant diaries from 16-to-18-year-old students, and he had three such students in mind. Gerard also said that it would be possible for me to study 14-to-15-year-old students, but that they would probably be too immature to produce significant, meaningful data.

At the end of our meeting, I arranged to confirm the next meeting by telephone, which I did a week or so afterwards. In our subsequent meeting, however, Gerard told me that if I did not ring him back to confirm future meetings, then I was to assume that it was confirmed. In this way, on the frequent occasions in the day that Gerard did not have time to take or make telephone calls, he could save time and prevent my disturbance in our respective schools.

The first meeting with students participating in the study

I arranged a first meeting with the students through Gerard - the eventual sample was formed of three 17-year-old students, who were in their final two years at New College.

On the day of the meeting I telephoned to leave a message for Gerard with the office, simply confirming my arrival time between half past five and six o'clock. Having received no reply, I arrived at New College a little before the expected time and went straight to the staff-room to meet Gerard.

Two of the three students, Anna and Monica, arrived in the staffroom and signalled their presence to Gerard, who then introduced the students to me – like Gerard, the names of the students were also changed to protect their identities. Gerard signed these students in and I went with them to the art room to explain the study to the students in private.

This initial meeting allowed me to gain Anna and Monica's confidence and build an initial relationship with them. As part of this process, once in the art room I let the

students enter first and choose where they sat, which allowed them to maintain their ownership of the environment. I then explained the research, and what I planned to study.

After describing the nature of the topic, I discussed the interviews and participant diaries with the students. I then asked them to record their experiences of art projects onto audio cassette tapes, as we had then - these diaries were to be recorded at two week intervals over the course of the academic year in order to create a consistent narrative.

Technology aside, my process of developing participant diaries was modelled on what Nachmias & Nachmias (1981) called the Intimate Journal. According to Nachmias & Nachmias, this journal is a set of personal narratives of events in a subject's life. These accounts, however, often go beyond simple description, and allow the participants to record their feelings and emotions at certain stages of their work.

In addition, the Intimate Journal also allows the subject to filter stories or tasks that they feel bare most relevance to their personal circumstances and that are important to them.

I was wary that the interpretations that were applied to Intimate Journals were in danger of being seen as too literal and lacking social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

The dangers of literal interpretation also appear in a study of historical narrative, in which Tonkin (1992) warns of simplistic, non-contextual interpretation. Interrogating a social-constructionist approach to personal history, Tonkin argues that social anthropologists should not see cultural accounts in isolation. Instead, she suggests that each narrative needs to be placed in the environment, principles and era of the person that created them and that they engaged in.

Thus, the Intimate Journals I planned were to be personal qualitative reports of the students' everyday tasks, and relied on participants' creative development. This

approach was opposed to the traditional log-style diary featured in a number of studies in this era (Hayhoe, 2012).

After explaining the structure of the reports to the students, I asked Anna and Monica if I could also conduct an interview with them during a later meeting. This was because I did not want the students to start on this project during their current meeting as all three were not present at the time – the third student, Emile, was on an educational visit and I wanted to gain the consent of them all three before I carried on with the data collection.

After this formal section of the meeting, I asked if I could see the girls' artwork, which they agreed to. This allowed me to get a sense of how they developed their projects.

After this meeting, I reviewed the meeting with Gerard, briefing him on what I had told the girls and telling him how I felt the girls reacted to this study. As I was not going to involve Gerard as a participant in the report gathering stage of the research, I decided to use him as an asset to the study, involving him in the development of ideas.

The purpose of including Gerard more in the research process was first suggested to me by a senior researcher. He felt that allowing the Informer a real sense of participation in the research would give a sense of tenure of the data collection practise.

After leaving the school, I noted a reflection on the meeting and my first impression of the students. Although the girls were blind, they maintained eye contact during our meeting, nodded and produced reassuring gestures, such as smiling and leaning forward during conversations.

This experience was very different to the adult students that I interviewed previously, during which people born blind would often look upwards during conversations. I never expected that eye contact would be maintained with these adults, but found that in these conversations students had eccentric facial expressions, rarely nodding or

Comment [A1]: Can I check the ages of these students? Were there issues of consent/parental consent?

Comment [A2]: The students were aged 16/17 when the study started. From what I remember from the study – this article is updated from one I gave at a conference at the time – there was informal permission from the students' families. However, this was before informal consent letters from universities that had to be signed, and no ethics committee existed in my faculty – as I pointed in this essay. Nowadays, the controls would be much stricter.

Comment [A3]:

smiling. In turn, this lack of visual cues would make the flow of the conversation and questions difficult.

Anna and Monica's gestures made the interviews easier for me.

Issues in arranging the monthly reports with students

I next arranged to meet all three students. As before, I telephoned Gerard beforehand and, having heard no reply, assumed that the meeting was still on.

It was about this time that I also conducted an interview with the school's principal. During the interview, the principal said that he would publicly announce the research to the other members of the staff, or "launch" the research as he put it.

Furthermore, during their previous meeting, Gerard had asked me to produce a synopsis of the research project that I was conducting that could be put forward as an official project by the art department - as New College was a government beacon school it liked to maintain this prestigious status for developing educational technique.

These tasks led to my recognition throughout the school. It appeared to me, even on my occasional visits, that to a small extent at least I was recognised as a teacher.

I began my second meeting by explaining the study to Emile - Anna and Monica arrived in the room a while after this meeting began. I then asked all three if I could return in a month's time for another meeting with them all to collect a first report. Although Emile had an educational visit, Anna and Monica explained that they thought they could.

After his introduction, I asked Emile, as I had previously asked the girls, whether I could see his artwork too. I later noted that, like the girls previously, Emile appeared to have a great amount of pride in his work and enjoyed explaining his portfolio.

During this second student meeting, I asked if I could begin recording my first reports with them, and was able to record Emile's report with him. In anticipation, I made

sure that I was sitting close enough to each of the students to be able to lean over and put the microphone in front of them as they gave their answers. Despite these students' visual impairments, they had a sense of the cassette recorder in front of them as they gesticulated.

The reports themselves were recorded using a set of topics. This decision was made for two reasons.

The first reason was to reduce ambiguity in the students' minds and to try and stop them ranging off into subjects that he felt were too irrelevant to the study. For example, in previous fieldwork I found that when I gave the adult students audio tapes and simply asked them to create reports, they would give very short narratives.

The lack of data gathered during this part of the fieldwork was most apparent in the reports of the students who had no art education when younger, as they appeared to be the student who had less self-esteem (Hayhoe, 1995, 2000, 2008).

The second reason was practical, as I only had limited time during my visits. Consequently, I felt that although allowing the students ownership of the content of the report, interjecting topics would allow me to remain in control of its timing and content.

The following were the topics I provided:

- Describe your current project?
- Describe how your visual impairment effects your current project?
- Describe the technical difficulties you have faced?
- Describe how you plan to proceed with your project?

After only a few minutes of recording this first report, I felt that Emile was becoming more and more uneasy about his footage. In particular, it seemed he was nervous about the description and sensitive aspects of his tasks that he found difficult as they were highly personal. This feeling was also displayed by the girls, who were still present.

As the students were nervous, I asked Emile if he would like to take the cassette away and record his reports in private. Anna also said that she would like to do the same, and asked if she could use my cassette recorder. I also read out the topics as I had listed them, and made an appointment two weeks afterwards for the collection of their tapes.

It was now around Easter 2000, and I wanted to get the fieldwork progressing as quickly as I could.

On reflecting on this meeting, I felt that I would have to devise different strategies of gathering data from individual students depending on their personalities. For example, although they appeared happy to show me their artwork, all three students appeared to approach their descriptions differently.

Anna was confident and articulate in her descriptions of work, and so appeared to need very little coaxing when recording her reports. Emile, however, appeared to have a great deal of social confidence and a strong personality, but appeared to have less academic self-esteem. Of the three students, Monica was the most nervous and shy, and the least forthcoming. Her artwork also appeared tight and careful when placed in contrast to the bolder and more experimental work of Anna and Emile.

Issues involved in the gathering of participant diaries

In subsequent meetings, I was only able to gather intermittent tapes from Anna and Emile, whereas Monica did not have tapes for any of our subsequent meetings. At first, Monica said that she did not understand the topics. I subsequently created explicit written topics for each student, although again this did not lead to Monica's involvement.

In a later visit to the college, I was told that Monica's grandmother was ill and she had left the school temporarily. In a further visit, I was told that her grandmother had died. After hearing this, I did not feel that I could ask Monica for her tape following such circumstances.

My eventual decision to lengthen the data gathering period was taken when I discovered that the students' work was long and drawn out, or progressed very slowly and indiscernibly.

I hoped that the data collected about each student at longer intervals would be plentiful enough to compile a comparison of the students' histories. This would be conducted through an examination of influences over the academic year's work where they emerged. Additionally, in terms of the data collection media, I told the students that I planned to visit the school once a month to record each student's data with them.

I also felt that it was a better idea to go to New College and collect the reports personally once a month. Not only did I feel that this would create a reliable form of data collection, but also that these visits would allow me to maintain a guaranteed relationship with the students for at least a minimal period each month. However, I also intended to visit the college more often in order to get a truer feeling of the culture of the school.

There were further communication issues when working Anna and Emile on a part-time basis. Firstly, it took several visits for Emile and Anna to tell me that they had not finished their tapes, and several more frequent visits before the tapes were eventually given over. Secondly, in July 2000 the last report gathering session of the second academic term also only contained a single tape from Emile. Again, Anna said that she would send her tape but did not do so.

However, despite these problems I did have more success at this time gathering data from Gerard and the school in general. Gerard also provided leads for further study, including a student of his who is now taking a degree in fine art.

Conclusions

What impact did this experience of data collection and administration have on my use of grounded theory / methodology?

There are two simple but important elements of grounded theory / methodology that were particularly tested in this research, and added to the implementation of the study.

Comment [A4]: Could you start with a positive conclusion and contribution of these methods to the grounded theory – and the value/impact of that theory?

These elements showed the strengths of grounded theory / methodology as an approach to investigating highly specialised fields (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Hayhoe 2012). These were:

1. The idea that all is data. This was the most powerful element of the methodology in this study. This element allowed for flexibility of analysis, making the gathering of data more plastic and reflexive; i.e. it allowed for changes and alterations to data collection methods when they became impractical or untenable. They also allowed older data to be brought in and analysed. This ability to change and adapt my data, amounts of data and emphases of analysis also mediated the problems that I had entering the school and getting the students to cooperate with the research.
2. The belief in no hierarchy of data. This made for more democratic data collection, and in my case observations – which had the same value as the voices of the students and teachers in their interviews and diaries - in particular it did not overpower the students' views. This in-built democracy also helped the ethical approach that I took to the research, and made me the pursuer of their data rather than the master of it. Although this was frustrating, particularly when the students did not produce their diaries, on reflection this power relationship was beneficial to the study as a whole.

What are the lessons for those researching part-time, as teachers or as researchers of special schools can be learnt from this fieldwork?

The main lesson is, nothing is ever going to be perfect, so remember that and carry on regardless.

The research situation I was presented with in this study was not ideal. The overriding problem I found was the maintenance of the fragile human relationships with the Informer and students. Although New College had exclusively boarding students, and so existed as a community after my own school's hours, this limited my access to classes.

For example, I only had time to mix with Gerard on his duty nights or on the rare occasions that he stayed after school for a significant amount of time. When available,

Comment [A5]: ?? Doesn't seem to make sense.

this time was also relatively short and could often be interrupted by the pupils who needed to be booked in and out of work rooms.

In addition, I could only see the individual students that when they were available after school; because of their frequent participation in sports and other educational activities this could often be difficult. As I observed during my case study, this lack of time made it particularly difficult for me to meet all of the students together and face their concerns together.

I did attempt to rectify such situations by providing the students and Gerard with regular times that were pre-agreed. I also attempted to hold the meetings I had with the students and Gerard in the art room, so at least I could talk about the students' projects with their work at hand.

However, this apart the problem of being a part-time researcher in a full-time environment was never fully rectified, and led to a less controllable, over-reliance on participant diaries.

I finish this article by raising the following questions for general debate, as they have a direct bearing on the practical and methodological considerations that similar part-time research creates:

- Is it necessary to immerse oneself in an educational culture in order to derive meaning from it?
- To what extent does the researcher's authority limit their ability to gather meaningful data during ethnographic fieldwork?
- How much control can one put in the hands of subjects and Informers of ethnographic fieldwork without losing control of the original aims of such a study?

Exercises and Further Discussion Questions

1. In my PhD, I paraphrase Nachmias & Nachmias' description of Intimate Journals as "a set of personal narratives of events in a subject's life". What might this phrase mean, and what does it mean for the process of researching past experiences?

2. The use of Gerard as an Informer helped to develop the fieldwork, but can you think of any criticisms of the use of Informers in this situation?
3. Can we always Intimate Journals? What role does memory play in making us worry about questions of reliability and unreliability?
4. In order to gather a sample of students, I partially relied on the practical consideration of the reliability of their data and their emotional maturity. What might be the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach to sampling?

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