# 'This is what I was trying to say': Challenging outcome led documentary filmmaking in higher education

There is much to be learnt from and through documentary filmmaking across all levels of education: from learning the art and craft of filmmaking, to experimenting with representational practices, or playing a supporting role in exploring other subject areas.  I teach on an undergraduate programme in the Humanities at a UK university and lead on a module entitled 'Documentary Filmmaking: Theory and Practice'.  Students study both how to make documentaries and how to critique and understand such filmmaking practices.  As is normal in an institutional setting, the module is assessed through defining learning outcomes and setting appropriate assessment tasks.  For our module, this comprises a film with accompanying documentation and a viva where students discuss their film in light of theoretical perspectives.  Our outcomes define mastery of the technical, aesthetic, ethical and administrative skills needed for successful production.  For example, are students able to demonstrate a good understanding of historical movements within documentary filmmaking and demonstrate a good grasp of concepts such as truth, subjectivity and ethnographic representation?  Over time, however, I noticed that students also appeared to be learning about themselves, their ideas and their social relations outside of our planned learning outcomes.  This was often through 'disruptions' to normal expectations prompted by the social complexities of documentary filmmaking.  Students were experiencing new ways of encountering others, potentially leading to new insights into 'self in the world'.  It's not surprising perhaps that there is always the potential for important learning to take place outside the control mechanisms of learning outcomes.  Learning outcomes employed uncritically can blind educators to powerful pedagogical relationships based on an exchange based on mutual inquiry and understanding rather than solely relying on the fulfillment of written criteria.

The existence of learning outcomes should not surprise us given the 'measurement culture' (Biesta, 2010) which permeates all levels of education.  Ball (2003) identifies three 'policy technologies' that neoliberalism enacts: commodification of educational processes, a managerialism designed to measure, manage and audit, and a culture of 'performativity', by which he means the employment of "judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change - based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)" (p. 216). Learning outcomes represent all three of these policy technologies.  They enable the 'packaging' of learning into discrete modules as commodities, they facilitate the 'easy' measurement of learning (i.e., a tick box culture), and they become part of the teacher's repertoire of tools to demonstrate performance.  Taken as a whole, they contribute to "the translation of complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgement.", (Ball, 2003 p. 217).  However, they also fundamentally impact classroom pedagogical relations as the student-teacher relationship can become one hinged on

performance and judgement.  As Hussey and Smith (2002 p. 229)  state, "the commodification of knowledge and the attempt to define learning outcomes precisely are antithetical to good educational practice." A learning outcome oriented pedagogy can tend to suppress diversions and emergent learning because it is focused on pre-planned objectives.  A good educational practice is responsive to and encouraging of joint critique of the subject in hand in the context of the lifeworlds of both teachers and students.

Wanting to learn more about my students' experiences of filmmaking, my doctoral research is based primarily on in-depth 'experience-biographic' interviewing with my students.  The research is not just interested in what happens during a student's journey of filmmaking. Rather, its experience-biographic method is aimed at understanding the emergent meanings that students ascribe to those events and encounters in the course of their ongoing lives.  Such a method can also prompt a re-evaluation or reflection on what happened, why it happened, and the possible consequences.  Many students choose to make their documentaries in the 'participatory' mode  (Nichols, 2010). This form of documentary foregrounds the interaction between filmmaker and subject.  Sometimes through seeing or hearing the filmmaker, or often just by implying their presence, the participatory mode speaks to that filmic encounter between self and other. Within the requirements of educational coursework, this type of filmmaking appears to enable forms of dialogue which sometimes are missing from everyday life.  It can provide opportunities for engagement with other and self in reconfigured ways.  I was first drawn to the potential of documentary making for social, personal and political change when a student, Sam, made a film about her neighbourhood in the centre of the city.  Living above a shop in a primarily commercial area, she felt invisible as a student and neighbour.   She represented this anonymity and lack of connection to the local community at the beginning of her film through a rear shot of her walking through the neighbourhood.  To make her film, Sam interviewed her local shopkeeper neighbours to find out about their lives, about the area and historical changes.  She thus not only came to represent her neighbourhood on film from her perspective, but she literally revealed herself to her co-inhabitants and thus created mutual recognition of her place in the community.  The film ends, shot from the front, showing her walking through the neighbourhood representing her newfound social connectedness and her visibility within the local community.

Emerging from my research are more stories of students engaging in dialogue with others both familiar and unknown.  For practical and personal reasons, students often choose to make films about familiar others.  One student, Linda, learnt more about her grandfather's life and, through this process, she developed an understanding of the barriers to intergenerational dialogue and of filmmaking as one means to help overcome those difficulties.  In interview she recognised the silences and exclusions that can exist around elderly people's lives and the necessity for dialogue to help sustain intergenerational solidarity.   Another student, Kim, made an autobiographical film about the challenges she faced in her life as student and mother.   She told me that her film became a way of expressing to the world how proud she was of her achievements. Most recently, I interviewed a student, Katie, about her film on student politics.  She spoke of her previous extensive engagement with politics as a teenager in youth advocacy and representation. At age 16, however, she became disillusioned due to government cuts in

youth services.  As a 19 year old, making her film about student politics, she interviewed the student union officers at our University.   She spoke about how her interviews with the student union officers became the primary material for her documentary instead of  'vox pops' with fellow students that she had initially planned.  A key theme emerging in my interviews with her was the significance of this change.  Initially Sophie spoke of how that was down to time constraints.  However she later spoke about how much she enjoyed that part of her filming and the responses the officers had given her.  Further on she reflected on how her change in documentary approach was actually due to her personal commitment to student politics and the views of the officers rather than simply running out of time.  She also reflected in our first interview on how disengaged she had become compared to her teenage years.  By the time of our second interview however, she had successfully won a union election as a student representative.  This is not to suggest a simple cause and effect process whereby filmmaking prompts change.  However, it does reveal how students can appropriate such  educational opportunities in ways which are surprising or unexpected.

In some research paradigms, the lives of researcher and participant are written out of the research.  Interviewing is seen as an effective means to deliver information from one person to another.  This is similar to traditional approaches to teaching where the practice is based on a delivery process from instructor/tutor to student.  In the kind of narrative research that I engage in (e.g. Riessman, 2008) the subjectivities of researcher and participant are foregrounded.  Like a critical pedagogy which demands mutual engagement through dialogue, the research interview encounter is a privileged space for me as tutor-researcher.  Freire (1996 p. 68) contends that key to the idea of dialogue is 'the word' as praxis.  By this he means that true dialogue comprises both reflection and action.  In this mutual act, new meanings emerge and reality is 'transformed'. Jointly, students and I discuss the meanings of their filmmaking experiences, and sometimes through this dialogue, new insights for both of us appear. For me, prior to the research, my understanding of students' filmmaking experiences is always limited since regular classroom work is directed at developing students' filmmaking skills and their abilities in theoretical critique in line with the learning outcomes.  However, through dialogue I am challenged not only to reassess my 'reality' of the meanings of filmmaking for any particular student, but more importantly to reassess the pedagogic relationship.  The danger however, with solely focusing on the former is that it can tend toward a therapeutic orientation whereby the tutor's role becomes one of 'helping' the student who in turn is positioned as lacking in some way and as being encouraged to speak about their private emotional responses to educational activity.  Ecclestone (2004 p. 118) points out the dangers of this 'privileging of the learners' voice' onto a therapeutic, introspective terrain". One side effect of this is to "shift attention from inequality outside and inside the education system to a focus on people's feelings about it." (ibid.).  My approach is to design the research as joint inquiry.  To attempt, in other words, an alteration of the pedagogic relationship such that I am also positioned as learner.   For students, on the other hand, the research process can reveal how understandings of their filmmaking experiences are sometimes revised.  One student, Gemma, chose to make a film about her grandmother's experiences living with Alzheimer's disease, but eventually produced a film about its affects on her mother.  Originally she had thought that the subject was too difficult to discuss with her mother but this changed through the filmmaking process as she realised her mother

was willing to participate.  In our research conversation, she discovered that it was actually her mother who 'kept the camera rolling'.  This also prompted her reflection on how societal taboos on the disease may have contributed to silences in the family.   Filmmaking opened up dialogue on a previously closed topic, and the research interview space invoked 'authentic education' (Freire 1996 p. 74) whereby together we discovered the social contexts which were contributing to lack of dialogue on this subject within her family.  This space is made possible partly because it lies outside formal assessment requirements.  As Addison (2014 p. 321) says  "One site in which assessment regimes and their paraphernalia, including LOs, are usually suspended is within extracurricular forums, including activities instigated through staff research. Why is it that within such contexts significant learning is often the result?"  I would contend that the removal of the requirement for learning outcomes and assessment helps to reconfigure our relationship.  As with documentary filmmaking, which allows students to encounter contradictions in their normal expectations of relations, in-depth interviewing affords the opportunity for 'dialectical thinking' in order to search out those contradictions (McLaren, 2003 p. 70). Thus the research relationship reconfigures not only what we do, but also who we are.  My role changes from 'supplier of knowledge' to one who is learning about another's experience.

Biesta (2010) talks of the 'worldly spaces' where students can encounter otherness and difference.  We need to continue engaging with students in ways so that alternative conceptions of learning flourish, such as those I have described in relation to filmmaking.   It is often in extended dialogue with an other, who genuinely does not know, that the true significance and wider social context of an experience becomes clear. But this 'not knowing' is multilayered. Sometimes I simply do not know the experiences of my students because of the pressures of classroom time and my lack of familiarity with the subject matter of their films.  However, more importantly, this is contextualised structurally by our pedagogic relations. The outcome orientation of much of our work and the pressures to display and 'deliver' content knowledge encourage a particular teacher to student educational flow.  In the marketplace of commodified educational activities and performativity, the temptation to 'lock into' planned outcomes means that we can miss much of educational value.  Emergent, not just planned, 'learning outcomes', should be a part of how we relate to students. My challenge now is to develop ways of making this kind of engagement a more routinized part of my pedagogical practice.

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