

FILM REVIEW

## Life at the other end: participatory film making, power and the 'common third'

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### ABSTRACT

10 In this article, we will describe and analyse the production of the documentary film *Life at the Other End* (The documentary film *Life at the Other End* (2012) was screened at Picture This: International Disabilities Film Festival in Calgary, Canada; Steps-International Film Festival on Human Rights, Ukrain; at the Joint Social Work Education Conference, Royal Holloway University, London; Staffordshire Performing Arts Film Festival, UK and at the We Care Film Festival, New Delhi, India where it won the 2nd place as the best film on disability (up to 60 min category). The film can be watched on Youtube here: <http://bit.ly/1O8zEqp>. The film followed a group of experts-by-experience who are members in a Social Work Inclusion Group (SWIG) (SWIG or Social Work Inclusion Group is affiliated to the University of Portsmouth. For more details about SWIG please see here: <http://swig.uk.net/>) affiliated to the Division of Social Work at the University of Portsmouth. The film followed the group during a process of writing and performing a play based on their personal experiences in the social care system. The production process will be explored as a case study for the application of the 'common third' approach. The case will highlight some of the approach's strengths and will describe the circumstances in which it failed (This article is in memory of Andrew Chappell who chaired SWIG, took a central part in the play and film discussed here and passed away on 23 July 2016).

30 This article will analyse the process of producing a documentary film, in which the first author was the film's director and the second author was a participant and co-editor. While our approach is influenced by Nelson's (2013) 'practice as research', we have treated the process of producing the film also as ethnographic fieldwork which has allowed us to carefully explore the power relations between those involved in the production process, the interactions between them and the decisions they made. These will be the focus of our analysis which we will consider on the background of the wider context-of-production in which this film was created.

A growing number of artistic projects in different disciplines either result from or attempt to enhance the collaboration and partnership between marginalised groups and artists,

social activists, social workers and therapists. Some of these collaborations result in artistic products, which give a unique insight into the marginalised communities involved, and can often challenge common stereotypes and promote social change. While there is rich literature analysing the prevalence of social stereotypes regarding a wide range of marginalised and minority groups, there is little research analysing the attempts of such groups to challenge such stereotypes and create more positive representations of themselves (Goris, Witteveen, & Lie, 2015). The current article will analyse such an attempt.

Goris et al. (2015) review the different key approaches to participatory film-making according to the centrality of artistic considerations compared to the centrality of the ‘problem owners’—those with direct experience of the issues discussed—in making the film. As Goris et al. (2015) describe, very often when participants themselves hold the power and make the decisions, artistic considerations are marginalised and the films rarely reach wider audiences. In order to reach wider audiences, professional film-makers need to be involved and must be part of the decision-making. At the same time, we argue for more balanced power relations in participatory films between film-makers and participants. Adjusting a series of practices such as the consent and release forms, and sharing the planning as well as the editing stage—while it may entail some challenges—is likely to produce better films, not only ethically but artistically.

The power of art collaborations between ‘problem owners’ or experts by experience (service users) and social workers, therapists and artists goes beyond the empowerment of experts by experience. It also goes beyond the ability to promote social change or communicate more broadly the concerns of experts by experience to policy makers and politicians. It promotes the development of a different kind of relationship between experts by experience and professionals working with them. Such relations tend to be unidirectional and unequal, and focus on the service user and their problems. While helping-professionals who are engaged with experts by experience or other ‘problem owners’ are taught to develop their empathy, such a relationship commonly focuses on a problem owned by the experts by experience. The service user is thus defined and perceived by their problem and the professional’s role is in helping to find the best way of dealing with or solving the problem. A relationship that is built around artistic collaboration that often brings together service-users, professionals and artists, changes such a dynamic. In such cases, the ‘problem’ has the potential of turning into a source of inspiration, ideas and stories which will be the essential building blocks for artistic activity. In addition, such collaborations shift the focus from the expert by experience into the participants’ shared aim—the artistic activity. The ‘Common Third’ from Social Pedagogy describes exactly this shift of attention into a more neutral and equal locus of attention and effort (Bengtsson, Chamberlain, Crimmens, & Stanley, 2008). It creates a more positive interaction and thus better allows a process of learning, acquiring new skills and building confidence (Hatton, 2016). During certain parts of the process that will be described, the collaboration had indeed such an effect, while at other stages, this was hampered.

## The context of production and the film

At the University of Portsmouth, social work students take part each year in a ‘Create Day’ during which they collaborate with experts by experience and artists in creating representations related to the lives and experiences of the experts by experience. The SWIG group

includes a good range of confident and knowledgeable experts by experience, many of whom have expressed their interest in using artistic mediums with social work students. These collaborative sessions culminate in an afternoon when students and experts by experience present the outcome of their shared work (ie in drama, poetry, dance, music).

5 For the Create Day of 2009, SWIG members took on themselves to contribute the opening event and to collaborate, months in advance, with students from the Performing Arts department. They wanted to co-write and prepare a play based on their personal experiences and to present it to a group of 90 social work students.

10 Art as a medium played a central role for the group and created a unique dynamic that was full of humour, playfulness and joy which were inspiring and motivated us to try and capture some of it on film. The film structure we had in mind meant to use the process of producing the theatre production as its narrative structure. Part of the 'story' this film was hoping to tell, is the story of this process including its trials and tribulations. This was an opportunity to challenge common representations of service-users as 'passive', 'needy' and  
15 'weak' recipients of services, through a case involving active, strong and confident individuals who improve social work education. We had an initial meeting with the group, in which the film idea was shared and gained their support. The university's media production unit agreed to help and provided us with the equipment, a camera and a sound technician, and later on also an editor.

## 20 **Shooting the rehearsals**

We started filming the rehearsals. One important and difficult decision we made early on was not to ask group members to sign Release Forms. These are forms that film-makers ask participants to sign, and in which participants declare they agree to being filmed and relinquish any right to influence the editing process. Since our initial intention was to break  
25 down power relations between experts by experience and artists we resisted this practice, not without creating great angst for the Head of the Media Production unit. While many of the people we consulted with, thought that this was putting the whole project in danger, we wanted to emphasise that this film will tell the participants' stories and will materialise only if they want it to. If participants don't agree with it at any stage they can and should say so, and they retain their ability to withdraw their participation at any stage.

30 The writing of the play and the rehearsals took place during a three-month period. The film captures the tension that arose between the participants during these rehearsals, and its resolution, but more than that it captures the creative, playful and humorous atmosphere that characterised the rehearsals. The different participants worked collaboratively with a  
35 shared aim. Filming these rehearsals was very easy and the camera's presence didn't create objections. We can assume that as long as the camera was following the rehearsals which included the whole group, participants felt relatively protected and were able to see and comment on what the film crew did. Things got more complicated later on.

## **After the rehearsals**

40 As we didn't want to make a TV news item, we needed to focus on specific characters, and tell a story from their point of view. Out of 10 participants in the play, three were chosen

already during an early stage of the rehearsals, based on their centrality in the group and in the play, and their willingness to participate.

Once the rehearsals were over and the play was performed successfully, we started filming the three key participants in their personal lives. We wanted to get to know them better and show how the contents of the play were shaped, reflected and affected by their personal lives. This stage was only slightly more difficult. Not all three were keen on being filmed and some fears and doubts were expressed at this stage, especially by one of the three. It is easy to assume that participants felt more exposed and less protected while being filmed on their own, and it was necessary to explain many times the film idea and rationale. Two out of the three leading participants had been filmed several times in the past, and were therefore more confident and open.

## The editing

The rehearsals were shot from mid-January to mid-March 2009 and the additional filming was finished by the end of September 2009. The editing took almost three additional years and turned out to be the most challenging and difficult part of making the film.

After the shooting stage was over in Sept 2009, the film was scheduled to be screened six months later, on 15 March 2010, as the key event of the 2010 Create Day. At least some of the difficult events leading to, and on the day of this planned screening, were a result of the tensions building up towards that date. We should also mention that this was a relatively big editing project for the university's Media Production team with over 30 h of recorded footage. The project was competing over the editor's time with many other films that were queuing up to be edited by him. The fact that it was a very different film from the academic-educational films this team was used to complicated things further and delayed finishing the film.

The long period that SWIG members—the film's participants—had to wait for the film to be edited, combined with their high expectations, increased their tensions and anxiety. During a meeting at the end of January 2010, it became clear that the film will not be completed in time for the scheduled screening on 15 March 2010. After a heated debate the second author, who was one of the leading group members and a key participant in the film, suggested that he would edit the film on his own, in time for the event. Late in January he started a race against the clock.

We approached the date of the Create Day screening with two half-ready edits and a lot of frustration and stress among those involved. The edit prepared by the university's editor and the first author was seen as suspicious and derogatory. Being committed to the voice of experts by experience, we screened the version edited by the second author of this article, himself a leading member of the expert by experience group. Though the film was far from being completed, the film opened the 2010 Create Day and the responses were positive.

One of the contentious moments of that Create Day followed a short lecture given by the first author. This lecture aimed to deconstruct common stereotypical media representations of disability. But, the representations shown as part of this lecture were understood by one of the three key participants in the film, as an expression of the presenter's own perceptions about disability. This participant's comments about the lecture were very critical. Not only was the director unable to deliver a finished version of the film in time, his version was potentially negative and offensive and so was his lecture. These remarks were made in front

of colleagues and students at an event that was planned to celebrate co-production with experts by experience.

The show had to go on and after some time for rest we went back to editing. The second author, as a representative of the experts by experience, joined the first author and we were assigned to a different editor. Though the editing process was long and exhausting—mainly due to the competing demands over the editor's time—and the film was only finished at the end of 2012, we had very few disagreements during that stage. The film was screened in several international film festivals and won the 2nd place for the best film on disability at the We Care Film Festival, New Delhi, India. AQ7

## 10 Conclusions

Producing a participatory documentary in a university context, especially one that is so much influenced by critical discourse, and the awareness of power relations between experts by experience and other professionals, couldn't materialise without sharing power. Things started going wrong during the editing stage when participants were not enabled to take part, and felt that power was not shared or that the information did not flow. These tensions were eased when a member of the group became a part of the editing team.

Making a participatory documentary involves working with participants and gaining their trust and cooperation. The more the film-maker/artist is able to create such a trusting relationship, the greater the likelihood that the participants will be open and allow access to different aspects of their life. Such increased access is more likely to provide rich material for the film. Ethically speaking, more equal sharing of power can only be positive. Therefore, we argue that sharing more of the power held by film-makers, while not relinquishing authorship completely, is likely to provide both artistic and ethical advantages to documentary film-makers, especially when working with discriminated against, and marginalised groups. Inclusion is a long process which involves learning new roles and new ways of doing things for all those involved. Practitioners and academics need to learn how to give up some of their power, and experts by experience need to learn how to adjust to a new reality and acknowledge when change has taken place. While suspicion is always useful, there is also a place to develop the ability to trust.

## 30 Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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