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The promise and problems of video diaries:

Building on current research

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The promise and problems of video diaries: building on current research.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to further explore the use of video diaries as a research method. Specifically, the principal objective was to detail and deconstruct the use of video diaries in relation to some of the claims made on their behalf, particularly those related to participant voice, empowerment and spontaneity. The paper is presented through the illustration of a longitudinal case study into under-graduate sports coaching students' learning and identity, in which video diaries were used alongside participant reflective logs and focus group interviews. Building on previous work, the findings give credence to an increasingly problematic conceptualisation of data derived from video diaries. Here, the claimed spontaneous and empowering nature of such diaries is questioned in light of the substantial role adopted by researchers to secure their production. The findings, however, also point to the realistic use of such methods which require careful consideration of context, and to being the principal, as opposed to a complimentary, research means within any given study.

Keywords: Qualitative methods; visual methods; video diaries; coach education.

Introduction

The general purpose of this paper is to further explore the use of video diaries as a participatory research method. It aims to do so by revisiting some of the claims and contestations made on behalf of such diaries in light of their use within a longitudinal investigation into student learning. Despite their being rooted in an interpretive epistemology, the paper takes issue with the unproblematic stance adopted towards video diaries' usage in much previous research (see Enright & O'Sullivan [2012] for a fuller discussion here). More specifically, the objective of this paper is to detail and deconstruct the use of video diaries, from the participants' perspective, in terms of the nature of the data collected. In doing so, it follows the lead of Hill (2006) and Enright and O'Sullivan (2012) not only in critiquing so-called participatory research methods, but also in empirically investigating participants' perspectives of their engagement with such means. This is particularly within the context of education. As a result, the study holds the potential to generate a greater understanding of the constraints and opportunities associated with video diaries as a research practice to be developed and utilised. In many ways, the paper also carries the current debate about coaching's epistemology into methodology; a debate between those who view the activity (and related data) as being more rationalistic and 'realistic' in nature (e.g., Abraham & Collins, 2011), and those who alternatively adopt a more relational and constructivist perspective (e.g., Author A et al., in press). Here, the latter have argued that taking empirical findings (or the methods that produce them) at face value only serves to simplify an inherently complex and contested activity.

The paper is presented through the illustration of a case study into student learning in which video diaries were used alongside participant reflective logs and focus group interviews as the principal research methods. In terms of structure, we firstly give a brief

delineation of the precise research aims and context of the wider project in which video diaries were used, and an explanation of why they were used. This progresses into the general debate surrounding the use of video diaries and what can be claimed on their behalf: a section which serves as the underpinning rationale for the paper itself. Here, the case is made that the perceived value of video diaries remains a contested and contentious issue. An outline of how video diaries were precisely used in our project is then given. This is followed by a reflective discussion, drawing on empirical evidence from the work undertaken, relating to the practicalities of using video diaries as a research method. Finally, a concluding section both summarises and reflects on the main points made in relation to the realistic use of video diaries in future research.

The research context in question

The general project in which video diaries were used as a research method took place at two different universities, in different countries, and contained two principle aims. Firstly, to explore students' perceptions and experiences of their under-graduate sports coaching degree; and secondly, to examine how these experiences shape students' identities over the length of the respective three-year courses. The objectives, in turn, included an investigation into; what students think about learning and how they carry out their studying; what social identities, in terms of their own narrativisations (Gee, 2001), do students possess; how and why these self-perceptions change over their time as students; and what do students consider to be the strengths and limitations of their programme in terms of content, delivery, and assessment? The design included tracking a group of undergraduate students (15 from one university and 12 from the other) over the duration of their three year courses. As stated, the aims were addressed through a range of qualitative methods within a broad case study framework; one such method was video diaries.

Why video diaries? A contested terrain

Video diaries have often and traditionally been considered a way for participants to frame and represent their own lives (Buchwald et al., 2009; Noyes, 2004); enabling them to tell their own stories, and to represent their own situations (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Punch, 2002). In this respect, Cashmore et al. (2010: 107) argued that free-form video diaries enabled participants to ‘project a sense of identity that is not limited’ by their particular status. In other words, they were able to express experiences and emotions that were relevant at a particular time, without the imposition of researcher assumptions. This was a point reiterated by Muir (2008) who ascertained that such methods afford access to participants’ worldviews whilst also giving them a ‘voice’ to directly express such views. Similarly, ‘visual diaries’ have been claimed to be ‘particularly successful when researching young people, because they enable participants to communicate and express themselves in meaningful and contextualised ways’ (Azzarito and Sterling, 2010: 213). Indeed, methods that ask participants to ‘create’ their own realities are believed (or assumed) to overcome some of the problems associated with the ‘rationalistic or logocentric tendencies of verbal approaches’, where words and utterances are largely taken at face-value or only limitedly interpreted (Buckingham, 2009: 633). Consequently, they are often claimed as being ‘empowering’ for participants, who are involved in a ‘collaborative process’ with researchers, allowing the former the freedom and space to speak for themselves. Similarly, visual research methods have been claimed to be inherently democratizing, where the traditional research power relationships (with participants being researched) is somewhat equalised. Here, Kaplan and Howes (2004) claimed that such means allow existing institutional hierarchies to be bypassed, permitting a transparency not always apparent through other, more researcher-dominated, methods. Others meanwhile have gone further in claiming that ‘video diaries

allow a visual and verbal presence of the respondent without interference from the researcher' (Pocock, Zahra and McIntosh, 2009).

Another espoused virtue of video diaries stems from their contended ability to engage with the temporal aspect of learning and development. Indeed, a video diary is defined by Buchwald et al. (2009: 13) as 'a digitized means to collect data on informants' lives, thoughts and development over an extended period'. In this way, they are advocated as able to engage with individuals' mundane, everyday often disorganised 'streams of consciousness' over time. This capacity to collect and directly analyse longitudinal data holds the potential to illustrate 'the extent to which [participants] engage with shifting, sometimes contradictory, insights and emotions throughout a given' time span (Cashmore et al., 2010: 108).

Although no doubt a certain similarity regarding the purpose of using video and written diaries exist, results from previous studies show discrepancies when assessing their applicability for research in learning. For example, Roberts' (2011: 675) work showed video diaries to be 'much more successful in capturing the development of student learning than written diaries'. This was justified by the almost instantaneous familiarity students had with the camera in allowing aspects of 'being' and 'becoming' to be explored. This was a point echoed by Noyes (2004: 196), who found that the use of video diaries allowed students to 'talk more freely about their unseen day-to-day experiences'. In this way, video diaries can be seen to circumvent some of the problems associated with the overly-considered construction of written text. Similarly, according to Monrouxe (2009), visual and more particularly audio-recorded diaries have the advantage of capturing subtleties of tone not possible in a written account. Pink (2007:141) further suggested that video diaries 'offer a sense of intimacy, a route to (intercultural) understanding and ways of knowing not available when represented through written words'. Such intimacy was also found by Moinian (2006) and Noyes (2004), who both claimed that participants often come to see the camera as a friend and an audience

which can actually take the place of the researcher. For example, in his study, Noyes (2004: 200) discovered that ‘five of the six children that formed the case study group greeted or said goodbye to the camera’.

It has been claimed that this investigative intimacy afforded by video diaries is further provided not only through the words spoken, but also via an analysis of participants’ body language, shape, hair style and clothing (Noyes, 2004). Such a method then, allows complex layers of developmental information to be unpicked, providing ‘lenses through which otherwise inaccessible aspects of...experiences can be viewed’ (Noyes, 2004: 206; Bottorff, 1994). Consequently, the multivariate nature of the production of images can itself be a rich source of analysis. For example, participants may position themselves in a given way for a perceived audience when producing such diaries (Gibson, 2005:3), allowing analysis not only of their linguistic content ‘but also how participants engage in identity construction’. The view of identity as ‘stories we tell about ourselves’ (Bloustein, 1998: 126) suggests that video diaries could, therefore, have an important role in understanding students’ identity development. A similar (albeit qualified) claim was made by Holliday (2004) in relation to exploring the performative dimensions of sexual identity. Despite some (others’) reservations regarding the ability to offer direct insight into aspects of the self, the belief still exists that being subject to keeping video diaries encourages a form of ‘identity work’ and related construction (Gibson, 2005).

Although generally viewed as an empowering research method, where participants are seen as being able to speak for themselves, this has not always been viewed as being so straightforward. For example, Jarvinen (2000) argued that despite advocates’ claim to be only mediated by participants’ perceptions of the social world and their positions in it, such disclosures are always (to a greater or lesser extent) a response to a researcher set agenda or a

contextual constraint (Pini, 2001). Indeed, some have argued that however much implied or explicit freedom and flexibility there may be in a research project, material collected cannot be presented as solely the participant's own production of audio-visual knowledge. This is because researchers nearly always tend to control the conceptual framing of the work itself (Brown et al., 2008); that is, just because a researcher is not physically present, does not mean that he or she is absent from the scene (Pini, 2001). For instance, Cherrington and Watson (2010) in their study of college basketball players, as opposed to giving participants *carte blanche*, tried to achieve a balance between guidance and freedom in the production of video diaries. Here, participants were given information about the type of content sought, although 'degrees of flexibility and freedom [were] implicit within these' (p. 270). However, Tribe (2006) argued that the giving of such guidance does not necessarily militate against empowerment or true representation of the participants. This is because they are still considered the contextual experts even if 'their' data stem from responses to a set series of prompts or other frame(s) provided by the researcher.

The empowerment claims of video diaries can also be problematized through not all participants feeling comfortable with a camcorder. This relates to not everyone possessing a visual imagination, not everyone wanting to feel in control, while others can feel burdened by the responsibility of having to collect footage (Muir, 2008). Similarly, Holliday (2007) believed that video diaries carry with them potential for frustration in that they are one way conversations, it not being possible to enter into a direct and immediate dialogue on issues which require or even demand clarification, challenge or empathy. What becomes clear then, is that the 'empowering' significance of video diaries is not as sequential or functional as first assumed. Such a view was given sharp focus through Piper and Frankham's (2007) recent reproof of such 'empowering' claims as being inflated and uncritical. Their critique was

based on a counter claim that far from allowing participants to ‘speak for themselves’, video diaries merely allow a ‘ventriloquization’ to occur; a point also supported by Bragg (2007) directly in relation to ‘student voice’.

A further critique of video diaries relates to the growing belief that the total authenticity of material produced by them cannot be assumed. Indeed, the problems and issues here make it a far from clear-cut process. For example, Gibson (2005) and Pink (2007), while applauding the potential for empowerment and collaboration that video diaries hold, stressed the importance of reflexivity in the conduct of associated research. This was a point realised by Branch (2000) who found that her students’ ‘self-discourse’ was coming to closely mirror her own; that is, she was unduly influencing the students’ thoughts and talk (echoing Piper and Frankham’s [2007] claim of ‘ventriloquization’). Such concerns resonate with those of Buckingham (2009), who subsequently questioned ‘whose voice do such methods actually represent’? In doing so, a claim of ‘naïve empiricism’ has been made in terms of the inability of such methods to actually enable people to ‘tell their own stories’ (Buckingham, 2009; Piper & Frankham, 2007). Hence, although some change in the power relationship could result from their use, visual means cannot be claimed to abolish the established hierarchy completely (Pauwels, 2004). It is a position which builds on Pink’s (2007) disquiet about the assumed neutral means of documenting social life through the visual; of merely taking what people say at face value, thus accessing their ‘voices’ in an unmediated way (Buckingham, 2009).

Furthermore, although no doubt video diaries are able to supply additional information than just the spoken word, Banks (2007) urged caution in relation to unproblematically accepting such a claim. He argued that while images could well reveal unconsidered insight, it is not universal or automatic that those benefits could not be reached

by other methods. Indeed, the indiscriminate and uncompromising gaze of the camera may not provide the indisputable representation of reality that is sometimes supposed (Rich et al. 2000). Similarly, others (e.g., Chaplin, 1994; Lomax and Casey, 1998) have suggested that visual images and their understandings are not direct or unproblematic representations, but rather are co-created by producers and viewers. In this way, they are similar to other texts and should, therefore, be subject to the usual interpretive cautions. This was a point reiterated by Stanczak (2007) who stated that such images tend to ask us to hold positions related to ‘this has been’ whilst also questioning subjectivities simultaneously. For Stanczak (2007) then, the visual ‘moment’ (i.e., the when and where visual data are collected) is both *decisive* and *decided*, thus somewhat bringing into play its constructed nature. Consequently, controversy and debate exists in relation to the claims and counter-claims of the merits and limitations associated with video diaries. Having located the method within the literary context, the remainder of the paper firstly describes how it was used within the current project, before going on to interpret and deconstruct our experiences of video diaries as a means to capture social reality.

Procedures

The principal intention related to using video diaries in this context, was to generate rich and interesting data through the representations afforded by the method (Pink, 2007). The participants then, were free to utilise any electronic dispositive capable of recording video (e.g., video camera, phone, computer) with no established rules given in relation to ‘where’ and ‘when’ the videos could be recorded. Guided by the two principal themes, learning and identity, the participants were asked to keep a video diary where they reported stories, experiences and thoughts about their lives as students. In this respect, the students were initially told they could verbally comment on any positive and/or negative experiences

they had in their programmes of study, explaining and giving examples of how and why respective experiences had affected them. This independence to produce free-form video diaries was an attempt to give students a ‘voice’ (Muir, 2008) to directly express their own views in their own time. After each recording, the students uploaded and sent the video to the principal researchers using an online cloud storage service (i.e., Wuala, Drop Box or Sendspace)

As previously stated, the video diaries were only one of three principal research methods used within the overall project; the others being reflective personal logs and periodic focus group interviews. In relation to the study’s precise design, in addition to the stated research aims, the interviews’ were somewhat structured on issues raised from the students’ logs and video diaries. This not only provided an opportunity for the further examination and deconstruction of the data collected, but also to realise the progressive, developmental nature of the research work itself.

Results and discussion

Initial interactions and recordings

Some of the students during the first year of the project found ‘talking’ to the camera a real challenge. This was in terms of thinking of adequate and relevant things to say; a state of affairs which militated against the traditionally provided spontaneity claim. For example,

Katie: *‘I think I would like to just stop talking, do you know what I mean? Like, if I can’t think of anything to say, and then it’ll just be a load of rubbish. Whereas if I’m writing something down, I think it’s a bit easier...’*

Tracey: *'Yeah – because you can pause, and you can think about it, and then you can write something else, rather than...just like, talk. Otherwise there might just be like, a pause! Sitting there....and I dunno if I'd like that [laughs]'*

(Focus Group 5, 17th October, 2012)

Tracey: *'Challenges, challenges of doing this. To start with, it just feels odd talking to the computer, just don't know what to say, uhmmm, ok what does it say...(reading from a paper), yes this is the only video that I've done. Probably might not like to do anymore. I'll give it a go. What else to say...how honest I am. Yeah, like I said more honest writing it down'*

(Video diary 1, 3rd November 2012)

In this respect, most of the students commented that they felt both more self-conscious and vulnerable in front of the camera, which inevitable affected the nature of the 'talk' or data produced. Furthermore, and somewhat echoing the work of Cherrington and Watson (2010), some of the students also struggled to 'find things to say', claiming there 'was only so much stuff to talk about'. Subsequently, many of the students even confessed to rehearsing their 'productions', which again somewhat goes against the claim towards improvised, spontaneous data. This was a point directly highlighted by Bruno;

Bruno: *'...I really made about 10 takes of the first video diary I sent in; then about 5 of the second...'*

(Video diary 3, 1st May, 2012).

A possible explanation for the students' conduct here can be taken from Pauwels (2010: 562), who suggested that such actions could be rooted in 'monitoring' behaviour; that is, 'self-conscious actions to being observed'. This self-consciousness resulted in a desire to produce an adequate visual performance, 'something worthwhile' that had to be prepared in advance. Although using audio-diaries, such an occurrence was also reported by Gibson's et al's (2013) participants, who would have preferred to submit written diary entries due to the related opportunity to better organize their thoughts and responses.

In further examining the 'spontaneity' claims of visual methods, Pauwels (2010) problematized the discourse of 'naturally occurring' events and talk associated with it. For Pauwels (2010), all video diaries are in response to something (a photograph, a verbal prompt, the stated aims of a given project). Hence, behaviours can be reactively 'spontaneous' without being 'naturally occurring' in the sense that such behaviour would not have occurred without the research (or researcher) intervention. Care then, should be taken in respect of such claims' precise meaning. Even being mindful of such cautionary notes, it was clear that our students' responses as captured on the video diaries (initially at least) lacked even the spontaneous reactivity hoped for. Despite this rather disappointing beginning, as the project unfolded, most of the students developed a greater confidence in talking to the camera. Although this was, to a degree, the inevitable result of familiarisation (particularly *within* individual recordings), it was also developed or structured by given topics or conversational 'hooks'. However, although some immediate success was evident in terms of greater articulations resulting from the given 'hooks', these successes were limited. Hence, once the prompts were removed, or not supplied, the quality of the video diaries tended to regress again. In the words of Barry:

Barry: *'I just find talking to myself in a computer, well, I just find it awkward and ... I suppose I [know that] I'm not actually talking to somebody. So, a lot of what I've said was based on the questions that you have asked. Like, I wouldn't have been able to say everything that I've just said without your questions. So, the answers I give don't really link together like a conversation does.'*

(Informal Conversation, 14th February 2013)

This was also echoed in some of the field notes taken;

In one of Mary's videos (dated 16th December 2011), she merely followed the prompts I gave (very closely). Her contribution didn't flow well. She looked at the computer screen a few times when reading the prompts; just trying to answer questions and move to the next one ('Oh right, answer the questions...[reading from the screen, quietly]...positive aspects of it [carries on reading from the screen]...uhm, yeah, uhm I've just said about the positive and negatives really [looks down to the left]...uhmmm [carries on reading, scratches her neck] - pause...uhmm, I think what could have made the assessment better [looking to the left], was if they give [sighs] some instructions before the test...because yeah, also if I did some more extra reading [shrugs shoulders] I'd probably have done better, but oh well...'). Mary wasn't talking to me in this video. She was only seemingly trying to answer questions. There was only limited little impulsiveness in her responses.

Ana Filipa seems really apprehensive and uncomfortable; this is her first contact with the camera. She looks down most of the time. I think she's reading; or, she has memorised what she wanted to say! Her speech doesn't flow...her face has little expression, just not natural...it looks like an attempt to produce the 'perfect video'!

(Field notes, February 26th, 2012)

The students appeared to find it difficult to merely 'think out loud' or 'air their thoughts', much preferring to have some degree of interaction or conversation; a penchant to respond directly to prompts or questions. Such a finding builds on the work of Holliday (2007), whose respondents also experienced frustration with similar 'one way' conversations, which naturally influenced the quality and nature of the subsequent data. Consequently, despite increased familiarisation, and the subsequent production of initial diaries, many of the students remained reluctant to commit to using or producing video diaries with any degree of regularity. Even giving students 'hooks' and a degree of structure still generally failed to fire their engagement to produce diaries on an on-going basis. When questioned on this, the feeling from the students was that video diaries was a 'method too far'. As they found writing reflective logs easier, while the focus groups provided a definitive anchor for their involvement in the project, the video diaries were relegated in terms of importance. Such findings are at odds with those of Cherrington and Watson (2010), who reported no such difficulties with their student-athlete respondents. A reason for this divergence, however, could lie in latter study's design where students agreed to produce two video entries a day for a period of seven days, whereas our students had no such quantifiable obligations. Although producing the required commitment, such definitive 'rules', we would argue, transgress the somewhat 'empowering' *raison d'être* of the method, a point we return to in more depth

later. Still, as far as our students were concerned, giving them less structure and obligations proved limiting in terms of generating the sort of spontaneous and ‘empowered’ data hoped for.

Developing a personal relationship and more reflective responses

Gradually, the semi-stilted responses evident in the diaries produced gave way to more informal talk. Somewhat contrary to Noyes’s (2004) initial findings that considered this to emanate from a personalised relationship with the camera, in this instance, the immediate relationship developed appeared to be with the researcher(s). The following reflective field notes, inspired by a video diary from Mary, illustrates the point;

Mary now tends to start her videos with ‘Hi there’ and always says good bye to ME and have a smile on her face when finishing her video entries: For example;

Mary: *‘I will update YOU next week with the next video diary. So, see YOU soon, have a good weekend. Bye bye’.*

(Video diary 2, 5th November 2011)

Mary: *‘I will update YOU with more next weekend, with whatever the task is. If there is no task I will just talk about, reflect on my week and all that, yeah. Thank YOU very much. See YOU later! Bye! (waves good bye)’.*

(Video diary 8, 3rd November, 2012)

Although such responses could be seen to mirror those given by Noyes’ (2004) respondents who also used a personalised ‘YOU’ in their video diaries, our students used such a personification in terms of the researcher and not the camera. This was evident as they

used the term 'You' and the researchers' names interchangeably. Consequently, and contrary to Noyes (2004), there was little doubt that the 'person' or the audience being addressed in this instance was not the camera per se. However, it could be argued that the students (again as opposed to the children in Noyes's [2004] work) were reflective enough to view the camera as the identity embodiment of the researcher(s), thus developing a close relationship with it as a confidant ('as one who will listen and understand, where others might not' [Noyes, 2004: 202]). Similarly, this personification could also be interpreted as a penchant for physical interaction in the generation of data, in that the students felt the need to direct their thoughts and verbalisations at 'somebody'. In this respect, they appeared to need the conceptualisation of a conversation with the researchers.

Although as time went by, it was difficult to ascertain if the students' video diaries really became more spontaneous, there was alternative evidence that the productions became increasingly reflective and considered. Thus, a tension was seen to exist between spontaneity in the moment, and a reflexivity about the (content influenced) task at hand. Such a development can be partially explained by Weick's (1998) work into reflective spontaneity. Here, the metaphor of the jazz musician was used to argue that improvisation draws on memory and the resources it contains, allowing a form of retrospective sense-making to occur. In this context, Weick (2001) argued that improvisation is not created in a vacuum but from a broad base of existing knowledge including many conventions that contribute to formulating ideas in a perceived logical and expressive manner. Such sense making gives structure and coherence to apparently spontaneous or chaotic statements. According to Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2007), the promotion of such an experimental culture and emergent learning is very much in vogue, with a 'designed chaos' being the goal of definitive strategies. Relatedly, others meanwhile have suggested that the outcomes of improvisation

rely on experience and consolidated routines (Miner et al., 2001), making it much more an intentional process involving consciousness of action or a mindful deviation (Garud & Karnøe, 2001). Indeed, Leone's (2010) insightful paper claims that improvisation studies (in whatever domain) have been particularly ill considered and theorised, with many related claims (often presented through artistic metaphors) being unsubstantiated. Echoing Miner et al. (2001), she points to the effect of cumulated experience as an important feature affecting improvisation, where individuals recombine intentions, existing plans of action and the familiar to create 'knowledge corridors' (Shane, 2000). This was a notion also emphasised by Pauwels (2010: 562), who claimed that data are more likely 'to be more representative when people grow accustomed to the special situation'. The students' initial lack of engagement with video diaries in this project, no doubt contributed to their inability to be spontaneous within the entries that were produced; that is, they simply didn't experience the process of making such diaries enough for the required learning to take place. In this respect, no 'knowledge corridor' of any width or depth was developed.

Need for constant (careful) researcher engagement

Similar to Cherrington and Watson's (2010:271) work, a starting point for using video diaries in this project was the assumption or recognition that students could 'actively document their everyday lives themselves'. In contrast to the aforementioned authors however, a principal finding within this study related to the required role adopted by the researchers to draw out and collect the data from the participants. Here, it was commented on frequently by the researchers (and with considerable frustration) that the students needed constant prompting and guidance to respond with the desired video entries. Without such structure, quite simply, very few video diaries would have been produced. The following extract from some field notes illustrates the point at hand;

I know that I'm trying to find a balance, trying to find the best way to 'assist' students with their reflection... I don't want to dictate the content of their reflection but if I don't help them, I'll get nothing. A real concern is how to keep students engaged. How much should I see them? How much do I email them? How much do I text? Today we have a meeting after this lecture. I have texted (sic) and emailed all the students, but not all of them replied. It worries me.

I hadn't given them (the students) prompts for the past 20 days and felt they were not contributing as much. During the meeting they (the students) discussed that they found it easier (to provide video diaries) when they had something to talk about, and that sometimes they did not know what they should say. I feel that although I am trying to get students to represent their day-to-day experiences they're asking me for more input, which I know will influence what they talk about.

(Field notes; 22nd, November, 2011)

Such a position was supported by the students themselves who frequently stated the desire for constant reminders from the researchers regarding the production of the diaries (*'Sorry for not having sent in any diaries yet...I don't know where to start...what do you want me to say? I really need more guidance!'* [Raul, Focus Group, November, 2012]) As a result of this need for a more structured approach, the initial idea of 'empowering' participants to freely produce their video diaries had to be re-evaluated (Tribe, 2006). Consequently, although the use of prompts was perceived as contributing to participants' engagement in the research, there was a crucial consideration regarding how the structure (or lack of it) could affect the degree to which the students' experiences were being represented. With the aim of

achieving a balance between guidance and freedom in the production of video diaries (Cherrington & Watson, 2010), structural triggers were subsequently provided on a sporadic basis through online platforms (i.e., Blackboard; Facebook) and emails. Such prompts included the following;

What have you learned so far at uni? Tell me a little about the content and how relevant it is for your development as a coach...How/where you learned it (e.g. chatting to your mates; a discussion with your tutor; during lectures, seminars...)? Any comments...?

What image do you have of yourself as a coach? Has it changed since you started? How? What caused the change? How do you feel about it? If not, can you think of reasons why it didn't change? Could you explain the reasons? Anything else to share?

The detail here stimulated the engagement with, and generation of, the diaries. A further issue with the prompts related to the language used within them. Here, as with the work of Branch (2000), it became somewhat evident that the students were starting to reflect the researchers' -talk. Although it was naturally impossible to tell if this emanated from the researchers or from a more general learning process, despite on-going reflexivity and critical discussion within the research team, the troublesome question was nevertheless ever-present of 'who's voice' was being heard? It was a doubt which showered increasing scepticism on the 'empowerment' or 'creative' claims of video diaries as a research method. Indeed, far from empowering students, the method only seemed to yield results from the constant encouragement and questioning, leaving any participant 'voice' heavily mediated both by the researchers and the wider study's aims.

Finally in this context, and somewhat echoing the point made earlier, what proved just as crucial to the process of video diary production was the rapport and relationship built between the researchers and the students. Indeed, the contact made and developed by the researchers seemed key for the participants' continual engagement with the project. Such contact, extended from sharing coffees in the university's bar, giving lifts as appropriate, to occasionally playing team sports together. Although such engagement and the morphing of researcher roles has been well document within the qualitative research literature (see for example, Adams, 1999; Author A and other, 2013; Irwin, 2006), the important thing here was that such social contact was almost exclusively initiated by the researchers, which again militates against the empowering claim of video diaries.

Conclusion and reflective considerations

'Creative visual methods' such as video diaries have been argued as enabling 'the subjects of research to express themselves more directly....as 'empowering' for participants' (Buckingham, 2009: 633). The findings from this study, however, agree with Buckingham's (2009) related critique that such methods are not unproblematically 'empowering' or distinctively able to give participants a 'voice'. In this context, Pini (2001) claims that such diaries only promise a kind of illusionary purity, mainly because they speak 'a familiar language of realism'. Neither are the gathered data necessarily 'authentic' representations of respondents' views and thoughts. In this respect then, we agree with a more problematic perspective of video diaries than are often presented. However, a point where we differ from Buckingham (2009) and others (e.g., Cherrington and Watson [2010]), relates to the claim that such methods are considered 'powerful' when combined with others. Rather, the students who partook in our work merely relegated video diaries to the least important rung of the methodological ladder in demonstrating much more frequent and considered engagement

with the written reflective logs and the focus group interviews (i.e., the other methods used in the wider project). For them, echoing the findings of Muir (2008), it seemed too much of an effort to produce diaries *and* written reflective logs. In the words of two of the students;

‘my schedule is really hectic so this is the first time I’ve had a chance to sit down and do it. Its half past eleven in the night so I haven’t got much time, much chance to sit down but I thought that this (i.e., recording a video diary) has now worked its way to the top of my to do list so this is getting done...’

(Tracey, video diary 1, 3rd November 2012)

‘Er – I, er, I always put in my diary, like, ‘need to do a video!’ and then something will come up that I need to get out of the way, and then –it’s like, oh... I dunno, I just get lost with time, and then... I write it down, and then – need to do this! – and then... but it just ends up not getting done. I’m sorry about that...’

(Mary, Focus group 7, 21st February 2013)

This lack of engagement was exacerbated by a feeling that it was more important to attend the accompanying periodic focus groups, which demoted the production of diaries in terms of their perceived importance (Tom; Focus Group 7, 21st February 2013: ‘I think it’s... it’s because no-one’s there forcing you to do it, ... so I don’t feel like I’m letting you down – whereas at the focus group, you’re making the effort to come here, so if I don’t come here, I feel like I’m letting you down’). The responsibility to collect and send the footage was just a burden too heavy to carry. In empowering students to optionally complete and submit diaries, they simply decided not to complete many of them. The espoused value of giving participants

‘voice’ then, was turned back on us in that some of the students decided they didn’t want to talk!

This is not to totally decry video diaries as a method, as they continue to supply a very rich and complex data source. In this regard, manner, body language and personal presentation all yielded interesting insights into our students’ learning and development. Here then, through the (embodied) smiles, frowns and expression of mood we certainly found clues about thoughts and feelings which could not have been clearly and so completely articulated by words. What we also found was, from the students that did produce regular video diaries, a developmental progression through the learning (and related identity) culture. For example, the students’ movement from positions of insecurity and frustration to a realistic engagement with relativism as the project progressed (somewhat echoing Perry’s [1968] classical learning scheme) became evident not only in what they said, but also how they ‘were’.

Furthermore, and similar to Noyes (2004), having the luxury of multiple viewings enabled an in-depth study of the students’ discourse and how it was seen to evolve over the course of their respective degree programmes. This continual process of reviewing, discussing (with other members of the research team and the participants) and interpreting, certainly allowed an exploration of apparent learning and identity development than perhaps would have been possible through other means. However, in contrast to Noyes (2004), our students didn’t make the ‘improvised entries’ he found with his (younger) subjects, thus we found no support for his and Bloustein’s (1998) earlier contention that older subjects would take greater ‘ownership’ of the camera. This was somewhat surprising, as other research (e.g., Cherrington & Watson, 2010) has relatedly positioned respondents as being heavily influenced by wider culture in terms of their engagement with forms of research and how

they ‘perform’ within it. Taking that our students had been immersed in a reality TV culture, inclusive of Big Brother, during their adolescent years, we somewhat assumed producing video diaries would have been both attractive and relevant to them as a data gathering method. Sadly, this was not the case.

Linked to issues of the students’ relative commitment to the wider project (the vast majority the students attended all the focus groups held so far), was the fact that even those who did produce video entries required considerable prompting and structure to do so. Again, this was different to Cherrington and Watson’s (2010) experiences whose subjects still produced diaries when ill and drunk. Conversely, the diaries and representations of participants’ selves produced in our study were much more heavily mediated by researcher involvement than we anticipated or desired. Not to have done so, however, would have risked getting even less video entries (and research related data) than we did.

On reflection, and despite the notes of caution sounded by Buckingham (2009) and Pauwels (2010), perhaps we were still too naïve in terms of our expectancy and hopes about video diaries as a research method. Whilst never totally agreeing with the ‘empowering’ claims made by advocates, we were nevertheless surprised by the level of structure and prompting required by the students who, after all, had agreed to partake in the study and knew what the expectations were. A way forward here then for future users could be to better heed Buckingham (2009) cautionary note about giving careful situational consideration to such methods’ use; that is, with whom and in what context will they be utilised, factoring in issues of time, inclination and general enthusiasm from potential respondents. Another consideration relates to the effects of making engagement with any method (if a project employs more than one) optional, particularly if another method involves physically meeting in a group where the obligation to attend is naturally much stronger. In this respect, there

should be no 'one size fits all' approach to the use of video diaries (Buckingham, 2009). Better acknowledging such realities, and the subsequent relationship between the researcher and the resultant mediated nature of the produced data, hold the potential to locate video diaries away from idealistic claims of participant 'voice', empowerment and research transparency, towards a more pragmatic portrayal of what they can really provide.

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