

# Disrupting familiar roles: Informal learning in undergraduate documentary filmmaking

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## **Abstract**

This report presents early findings from ongoing research into the documentary filmmaking experiences of undergraduate students. Such filmmaking offers opportunities to fulfill stated curricular requirements in terms of technical competence, creativity and ethical documentary. However it also provides a potential site for 'informal learning' (e.g. Drotner, 2008) outside formal assessment criteria. This report presents a case study of one student's experiences of making a film about her father in the 'domestic ethnographic' mode of filmmaking (Renov, 2004). Data from two interviews with the student illustrate how introducing the camera into a familiar environment provoked various forms disjuncture (Jarvis, 2010) in social interaction with her family. Filmmaking offered her the opportunity to complete a film about her father but also appeared to provoke unplanned explorations of relationships within her family. Documentary production in this context can be seen as acting as a bridge across multiple sites of learning and positionality for student filmmakers.

## **Keywords**

Informal learning, documentary, filmmaking, higher education

## **Background**

This report presents a case study of the filmmaking experiences of an undergraduate student on a documentary theory/practice module. 'Jodi' made a film about her father a bomb disposal expert and through on-camera interviews with her nan, mother and father examined the ways his career impacted on the family. I teach on the module and we assess students' work in two ways: assessment of the finished film for technical ability and

documentary storytelling competence and through a 20 minute viva where the student discusses their film utilising documentary theory.

Each year a number of students choose their films to be about people they are familiar with. These are films which Renov (2004) calls 'domestic ethnographic' documentary. Renov argues that because the lives of filmmaker and participant are "interlaced through communal or blood ties the documentation of the one tends to implicate the other in complex ways" (p. 218). This type of filmmaking he says is a "vehicle of self-examination [for the filmmaker], a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other...The desire for the other is, at every moment, embroiled with the question of self-knowledge" (ibid.). This prompted me to reflect on the extent to which (if at all) students were learning more from filmmaking than we were determining through assessment criteria. I'm using Jarvis's (2010: 41) categorisation of learning into 'situations' (formal, non-formal and informal) and 'types' (intended and incidental) to conceptualise such learning potentials.

Documentary making in the context I describe can be visualised as a movement across these learning types and situations. Students first encounter such activity in a formal intentional learning situation, that is within the higher education institutional context of explicitly stated module requirements. However production of the film takes students into informal situations which can be seen to embody elements of quasi-everyday interaction. This principally takes the form of on-camera interview encounters

between filmmaker and familiar other. This encounter can be visualised as a borderzone between everyday life and formal education or as Potter (2011) terms it a 'semi-permeable membrane' between worlds of home and educational institution.

I am interested in the incidental learning that may be taking place in this situation. Jarvis (2010) argues that there are two conditions for such learning: social interaction and 'disjuncture'. The latter occurs when we cannot take our world for granted, where our normal expectations are called into question. He argues that "we have to find new explanations, new knowledge, new ways of doing things. In other words we must learn." (Jarvis, 2010: 64).

Depending on who they are interacting with and the prior filmmaking experiences of all involved, such filmmaking interaction could to a greater or lesser extent be seen as a form of disjuncture. So in what ways (if at all) can the particular forms of interaction arising through documentary making be seen as disjuncture? What are the range of experiences within those interactions and what opportunities for learning can those experiences provide?

## **Methodology**

Students are invited to participate in interviews with me about their filmmaking experiences. I carry out two interviews with each student. I structure the first interview around the journey of filmmaking, from original intention and rationale, through planning, production (filming) and post-production (editing). I end by asking the student to reflect on what they think they have learnt from

the experience. In the second interview, I ask them to clarify and correct any aspects of the first interview and ask them to talk about the experience of the first interview. This may be the first time that they've had such an opportunity to discuss their university work in such an extended way.

However, both in its orientation to listener and as a "productive site of reportable knowledge itself" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 3) the research interview is not a neutral site of information transfer between interviewee and interviewer. Instead, interviewing is deeply implicated into the construction of findings. There isn't space to expand on this methodological issue here except to note that research interviewing as a potential site of reflection on creative activity is worthy of investigation itself.

### **Disrupting the familiar**

The interviews with Jodi revealed different types of disruption. The first was that of intention. Originally she planned to give 'a gloss over' of her father's career. She stated that her prepared questions focussed on the 'facts and figures' of his career. However once filming started:

*"I had more questions come into my head that I didn't actually have written down because I just wanted to find them out for me, because I had never really spoken to my dad about any of the stuff that we filmed".*

So her initial ideas changed once the camera started rolling. Her questions became more spontaneous and intimate. The disruption here was to what expectations of the filmmaking would be like and what it turned out to be.

The second disruption was to everyday (familiar) patterns of interaction and how the camera sets up alternative roles for those involved.

*“the camera gives you a prop and a reason to ask these things. cos I know I could ask any of them anything but it just felt like that had given me a permission slip to do it”.*

In this situation, a different role arises (as filmmaker) which facilitates an alternative mode of interaction:

*“maybe that's why the camera helps because you're taking yourself out of your normal role as a daughter and putting yourself as a documentary maker so you can ask these things”*

One aspect of this is the identity that the tools of filmmaking can offer to the person behind the camera. Jodi talked about how when she started her questions she looked through camera viewfinder enabling an indirect mode of address, making it easier to ask questions.

*“... and obviously they didn't know what I was doing they probably thought I was just adjusting the sound or something but really I was like 'oh I don't actually want to look at you I'm just going to ask you from behind here”.*

Here the apparatus appears to provide 'a cover' as filmmaker identity to hide the initial embarrassment or discomfort of the daughter identity acting in this, for her, unusual way.

The final disruption was to understandings of 'other'. Reflection on the filmmaking appeared to provoke insights into the nature of familiar roles:

*I just never really thought about the way I was brought up, and the qualities my parents have, and who they are as people. Because you just see them as mum and dad, you don't see them as like...their own individual people with their own lives. Obviously I knew they had lives, but I never really thought about it much....But then you think, "Actually that is also Staff Sergeant xxx, not just dad.... How one person can be different people to so many ... Different roles to different people."*

Filmmaking opened up insights into different roles that people can play in different contexts, the filmmaking itself being one of them. It seems that in this case study filmmaking can provide a powerful way of altering family dynamics, momentarily at least, that allowed a daughter to ask her parents questions that she may not have ordinarily asked.

## **Conclusion**

The film making provided the film maker with a new positionality in which not only to ask but to find out what it was that she wanted to ask. In her words it was 'permission' to encounter her family in unfamiliar ways. Reflection on the

experience through the research interviews appeared to provoke new understandings of her parents and her relationship to them and beyond this to the roles that social actors play in differing contexts, filmmaking being one of them. Her insights however appear to arise out of a complex mix of types and situations of learning: from formal module requirements, through informal filmmaking interaction and finally the research interviewing.

The case study presented here exemplifies one (positive) experience. The research is also revealing however the tensions that can arise from occupying two different subject positions simultaneously in the domestic ethnographic mode and the ethical considerations that arise for students. The research is opening up for investigation the ways in which students negotiate the camera as both barrier to and facilitator of relationships in filmmaking and beyond. Sometimes enlightening, sometimes uncomfortable, often thought provoking for the filmmaker, such documentary making has the potential for learning beyond formal curricula requirements.

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