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Stepping Up and Stepping Back: Identity and Voice in Undergraduate Documentary Filmmaking

This paper presents findings from ongoing empirical research into the experiences of undergraduates who make documentary films about 'familial others'. In the course of their curriculum, such creative practice takes students out of the formal setting of university and into 'home territory' where the frame of documentary filmmaking can provide for unexpected encounters. Documentary filmmaking in this context can be seen as acting to bridge university and home and to offer multiple sites of learning and positionality for student filmmakers that may go unrecognised. This unintentional outcome of filmmaking is one which is not surprising given that the camera has been claimed as a 'psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do' (Rouch 1979: 57). Drawing on qualitative interview data, this paper illustrates how different conceptions of identity and voice arose for a student in the course of her filmmaking. In the context of Higher Education, the paper argues for a broader conception of learning, one which takes account of the multiple and hybrid spaces in which filmmaking practices occur.

Youth Media Literacy Workshop at the Media Education Summit 2014

In the culmination of the Media Education Summit 2014, a group of teenage students from across Prague presented a film they had produced about media literacy. Filmmaking was one of two threads in the one day Youth Media Literacy Workshop, which was organised in parallel with the two day main Summit. In the morning the youth filmmakers had a discussion about what media literacy meant to them and the role of media in their lives but were then given roles as journalists, investigating media literacy through film production. They were assigned the task of interviewing contributors to the main conference, be they key speakers or panel contributors, and then editing interview excerpts into the final short film. The Youth Media Literacy Workshop through its practice oriented methodology was providing these Czech students with opportunities to meet delegates and speakers but in more formalised and structured ways. They would be taking on 'professional media producer' roles at least for a day. In his short introductory speech to the conference audience, one of the student filmmakers spoke on behalf of the production group and commented on what he had personally learned from the experience. He spoke about how he had learned not to fear talking to anyone because those he had encountered in making the film had been 'very pleasant'. In what appeared to be a spontaneous comment, this student chose to introduce the film not by talking about the final piece itself but instead his production experiences and what he had learned about himself through his encounters with those he filmed. Sitting in the audience, his comments resonated with me. I've been enquiring into the documentary filmmaking experiences of my undergraduate students particularly in regard to the social encounters that such film work can engender.

This technique, for filmmakers to seek out and elicit views from willing participants and then shape interview talk into a filmic text is the mainstay of the 'interactive' (or cinéma vérité) documentary mode (Nichols 2010). Indeed it defines it. Ellis (2012) also conceptualises documentary filmmaking as personal interaction. He asks: 'What is it that is really going on in the framings of a documentary event, both when it is being filmed and when it is being watched?' (p. 53). This is a useful way to think about production processes in order to consider the roles that people play in such interaction, or in light of the Czech student filmmaker's comments, the roles that people take up during filmmaking. Ellis draws upon Goffman's (1959) analysis of situation, frame and role in social interaction. A documentary interview in this view is a situation in which the presence of the camera and other contextual factors impact upon the understandings that all the participants bring to that situation, how they frame the interaction, and the roles that they play. The documentary interview involves complex framings – an 'unnatural conversation' – in several ways: 1) because of the implicit or explicit orientation to the future audience, 2) because of the setting (equipment, placement of interviewer / interviewee, and 3) understandings of the nature of such interaction. For example, the filmmaker has 'permission' to ask sorts of questions that perhaps wouldn't normally be asked, and for the interviewees to respond in particular ways. Renov (2004: 127) names this function of the camera as an 'incitant to confession', while Rouch (1979: 57) calls it a 'kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do'. The camera is not somehow magical itself but instead is embedded into the social context of human encounter. Prior knowledge about documentary and filmmaking, and the relationships of those involved all play into these complex framings.

It is this view of documentary filmmaking as social encounter which is guiding my exploration of the film production experiences of undergraduate students. In such configurations there are potential disruptions to preconceived notions of the 'other', either for the potential for academics to be 'pleasant' (or otherwise) or in the encountering of familiar others in these unfamiliar (filmmaking) contexts. As filmmaker Ross McElwee puts it: 'For me, putting a camera on my shoulder is a wonderful way of intersecting with life. It sparks a response from people I'm filming. It takes me places I wouldn't ordinarily go, not just geographically but emotionally and psychologically with the people I'm filming and with myself.' (cited in Lucia, 1993: 37).

'Stepping Up': Leah's experiences of filmmaking

In this research forum piece I'm presenting the experiences of Leah a second year undergraduate who chose a second year option module in documentary theory and practice. She had decided to make her film about her grandfather who was living in a nursing home and who had Parkinson's disease. This type of filmmaking is well established. First person cinema (Lebow 2012) has a lengthy tradition arising out of feminist filmmaking and (French) cinéma vérité – films centred on the interactions between filmmaker and participants. The 'new autobiography' as Renov (2004: 106) calls it, arose out of the desire to re-centre the subject in history, and to destabilise notions of authority in 'traditional' documentary. It was through this first person approach that Leah represented her grandfather. In order to understand such filmmaking experiences, I carry out two interviews with each student. The first is loosely structured around the chronology of the filmmaking 'journey': From planning, to production, to post-production and then final reflections. In the second interview, I ask the student to reflect on what it was like to be interviewed previously, and then I take the opportunity to clarify themes of interest to me. It was in the course of the first interview with Leah that she used the phrase to 'step up'.

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This arose in a section where I asked her what it was like to be with her granddad whilst filming:

Ross: 'Do you think either of you changed the way you were because the camera was there and running?'

Leah: 'No, I think part of me wonders whether I was a bit more in control, because usually, him being, like, my elder, like, the granddad, I'd let him conduct the situation. But I think, maybe, I then, like, took the step up.'

It was the use of the phrase 'step up', albeit hesitantly, that intrigued me and about which we subsequently spoke at some length. What did the experience of making a film about her grandfather mean to her and what meanings did she ascribe to the phrase 'step up'? The answer to this partly lies in her motivations for making the film.

In the first interview Leah spoke about why she wanted to make this film. Her answer raises questions of the complex dynamics of documentary filmmaking with familiar others. She said:

'after learning about the different styles of documentary … it seemed something that I was very passionate about … I had not really spent a lot of time just with my granddad, … I knew that I wanted to discover more about him. So it was a personal finding out experience into someone that I'm related to. … in view of the fact that with him having Parkinson's, and him recently losing my nan, and being put in a home, that he was also quite lonely.'

Then came a slight tension in how she summed up the reasons for making the film.

'So I thought it would just be a great, not an excuse, in a way, that's a pretty

bad way to justify it, but a way to go to spend some time with him, and that I

know that he'd enjoy it as well.'

There is a tension here between two types of framing for Leah, the module requirements

to make a film to gain credit towards her final degree, against the desire to spend time with

a loved one and perhaps a perception of giving something back to him. This overlapping

of university and home conceived as a hybrid 'third space' can be 'disharmonious'

(Guttierez et al. 1999: 287). Sometimes conflicting values and identities arise because of

a desire or necessity in one sphere overlapping with competing desires or necessities in

another. Potter's (2012) work in the context of school education with younger learners,

uses the metaphor of a 'semi-permeable membrane' to illustrate how things of value in

learners' lives, their skills and dispositions and cultural experiences ought to be valued

more across school and home boundaries. In the kinds of personal interaction I'm

discussing here, we can see that relationships alongside values and identities also flow

across this boundary. In Leah's motivation answer, she touches on learning about

documentary styles, touching on her identity both as a student and a filmmaker, valuing a

particular type of documentary, but in completing the answer she suggests that her identity

as granddaughter is also important. Existing relationships can provoke or prompt

documentary filmmaking as part of a student's formal learning, but these relationships can

enter new territories as part of that process.

I asked Leah about the presence of the camera and whether it facilitated talk about things

that maybe she wouldn't or couldn't have asked in everyday kinds of interaction. She said:

'It gave me the courage to ask those things, because it had a purpose, but now

it's taught me not to feel that way, and the fact that I can just ask anything I want

to him. But, yes, because I was conscious that I wanted to get things out that

were interesting, and because the camera was there, as opposed to talking

about day-to-day things like the weather'

The identity positions being negotiated here are again of filmmaker and granddaughter.

The filmmaker has purpose and has permission to 'get things out that were interesting'. It

also appeared to provide a sense of courage. But why the need for courage?   Leah

talked about how sometimes as a child it was difficult to be in control of a situation. In

contrast to a normal family dynamic where adults would take over:

'by doing this you are in control, and I think it then gives you a step up, which

is quite therapeutic, for that situation, sort of, how you mold – not mold the

situation, even though you are – but in discovery, what comes out, and then,

obviously, which direction you choose to go when you find out those things.'

This is the second time that the phrase 'step up' appeared in Leah's interview talk. She is

describing a sense of control that emerged during the encounter with her grandfather in

the context of her documentary project. It seems to provide her with the courage to ask

and then take conversation in directions more of her choosing.

But there was another aspect to control appeared in my conversations with Leah. In an

emotive part of the first interview Leah spoke passionately about how important it was to

'get it [stories of her grandfather] out there because there are people that are lonely'. She

spoke at length of how this experience helped her realise the importance of 'stepping back'

and letting other people talk.

'I think it's just helped me realise that you just need to step back and let other people talk.'

I returned to these twin aspects of voice, speaking up/being in control and letting other people talk in the second interview. As I indicated earlier in the framing of this case study, I wanted to clarify the phrase 'step up'.   In her answer she provided multiple answers:

'I think when you allow someone to finish what they need to say .... without butting in I think that is stepping up and being in control because you're allowing them to finish their thought, being on the higher ground, realising that they may not have meant what they immediately said so allowing them to then realise 'oh did I want to say that?' '

Stepping up appears to be a move to take responsibility in various ways.

'you step up to a challenge this film was a challenge. it was stepping up to a brand new, I opened up a brand new branch of the world to me, step up to going to see grand dad, stepping up to the relationship, stepping up to creating a bond, there was something for us to do together.'

I read this as a recognition by Leah of the value of voice. The goal directed activity of filmmaking, for this student at least, in conversation with me, helped provoke new reflections on her own and others' voices. Couldry (2010: 130) states that 'Voice as a practice is embodied and its context is often, although not always, the presence of other bodies: an occasion to speak or remember, an opportunity to exchange stories, a shared

act of interpretation'. For voice to matter, it needs recognition. In my interviews with Leah she appeared to be reflecting on these struggles for recognition. Couldry argues that there are struggles of the aged to be heard as they are now and not as they were. He goes on to say that this could be 'based in the decline, in Britain at least, of shared narratives in which both the aged and the young could equally be subjects' (p. 123). Whilst I can make no overall claims about the 'equality of subjects' in Leah's situation with her grandfather, her use of the phrases 'stepping up and 'stepping back' reveals a complexity in her understanding of voice.

Conclusion

Whether being apprehensive in interviewing academics for a conference, or in spending time with a loved grandfather, filmmaking can bring opportunities for encounters which can be surprising, satisfying (or frustrating). In these multiple and hybrid spaces of filmmaking familiar ideas and roles may be disturbed.   My interviews with Leah produced a dialogue around how documentary filmmaking can be viewed as fertile ground for explorations of voice. She recognised that she had taken a 'step up' but that 'stepping back' was equally important in the interactions with her grandfather. Her filmmaking was a complex experience in which both stepping up and stepping back could simultaneously occur. It is important however to recognise the entanglement of the interview research with the filmmaking. It was in discussions between myself and Leah that her comments and realisations arose about value and recognition of voice. Mirroring Ellis's (2012) description of personal interaction in documentary filmmaking, tutor-student interviews in research contexts are hybrid dialogic spaces. The interviews offered me a privileged place in which to talk at length with Leah about her work and perhaps for her, a recognition of her narrative of documentary film production. These opportunities are rare in teaching contexts of Higher Education.

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