Playing with Participatory Action Research (PAR):
The Role of Digital and Audio-Visual Tools

Gioel Gioacchino, Institute Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK
Kirsten Cheryll Williams, Recrear International, Medellin, Colombia

ABSTRACT

A myriad of new tools have been integrated into participatory action research (PAR). This article reviews the role and effectiveness of Photovoice and Participatory Videos as tools for conducting PAR. Advocating for experimentation and innovation in research, the authors discuss the process of adapting new media and creative techniques to PAR. Although integrating new tools provides a big opportunity in PAR, the authors suggest that it is important not to get carried away by the tools, but rather maintain focus on the ethos and intention of PAR, and use any tool towards a more inclusive and profound way of understanding ‘research’.

KEYWORDS

Digital and Audio-Visual Tools, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Video, Photovoice, Qualitative Methods, Recrear International, Research Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the usefulness and adaptability of audio-visual and digital tools for Participatory Action Research (PAR) processes. Audio-visual and digital tools are understood here as the realm of publicly available technologies that reposition individuals as co-producers of knowledge (Gubrium et al., 2014). We define PAR as an orientation to inquiry embodying a participatory paradigm, which seeks to reframe the boundaries around what is ‘researchable’ and who is a ‘researcher.’ PAR values practical knowledge, steering the research process towards the increased well-being — economic, political, psychological, spiritual — of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part” (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

“Questioning the existence of an objective reality, the participatory paradigm understands that “things become what our consciousness makes of them through the active participation of our mind” (Heron and Reason, 1997).

In this paper we understand PAR as the process of doing research with others for the purpose of generating collective spaces that can spark deep inner transformation. We see this process as a precondition for action that changes our day-to-day realities. In this sense PAR is inherently flexible; in fact, it begs for adaptation and innovation (Estacio, 2012). For example, instead of proposing a rigid research design, PAR’s pedagogical approach includes cycles of reflection and action (Brydon-Miller,
Within these cycles, any process utilizing PAR will have to be co-constructed to be useful within a specific context, community, visions of the world, habits, and resources (McIntyre, 2008). With the rise of digital and audio-visual tools, PAR practitioners are venturing into new territory, taking a step further in reaching people with tools that are accessible and interesting to them as knowledge-producers (Mallan, Singh et al., 2010). On the one side such tools can help to capture new voices, expanding the range of people involved in undertaking research. Meanwhile, digital and audio-visual mediums can expand the access to research, making a wide range of content available outside the walls of academia (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2012).

In this paper, we review what academics, as well as practitioners, have to say about their experience using digital and audio-visual tools in PAR. We draw on material collected through three semi-structured interviews (each lasting between 40 minutes and one hour) conducted over Skype with practitioners of Photovoice and Participatory Video as well as from a range of informal conversations. Finally, we also draw on our lived experience adapting creative techniques to PAR as part of our work with Recrear International, a youth-led organization that utilizes action research towards youth empowerment.

We argue that the explosion of easily accessible technology is an exciting opportunity for the evolution of PAR methodology. Considering that young people tend to be early adopters of new technologies, digital and audio-visual tools might organically become the new frontier of PAR (Lovett, 2007). However, we need to bear in mind that these new methods are not automatically ‘participatory’ or ‘action oriented’. Instead, it is how methods interact with the attitudes and intentions behind a research design that can make a project embody PAR’s ambitious paradigm shift.

This paper is structured as follows: We first introduce Participatory Action Research (PAR) highlighting the worldview it proposes. We then scrutinize the use of two popular audio-visual tools, ‘Photovoice’ and ‘Participatory Video’, drawing some lessons learned from using these methods and discussing some of the gaps between theory and practice. Based on the analysis of these two methods, we then explore how new digital tools can be utilized to facilitate PAR, highlighting the opportunities and challenges associated with venturing into this new space. We conclude with some final reflections.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: A WORLDVIEW

At Recrear, we fell into PAR in response to a need to find deeper meaning in our work with young people. We perceived that ‘youth’ are typically viewed as beneficiaries of development programs, and that efforts to encourage their participation in development processes tend to be tokenistic (Cahill, 2007; UN, 2010). As such, we propose to take the time to listen to young people’s stories in order to integrate them more meaningfully into community development processes.

Our encounter with PAR started from an internal questioning of the traditional approaches to development, which, we felt, replicate a narrative that over-glorifies economic growth. Instead, we defined ‘development’ as ‘the process through which individuals deepen their connection with themselves, each other, their community, and their world’ (Recrear, 2016). Based on this definition, our work is designed to create spaces to collectively understand young people’s diverse experiences and values.

Similarly, to us, research is not something abstract, to be undertaken purely for academic purposes. Rather, ‘research’ is “a way of making sense of the world around us, as well as the launch pad for inspired collective action”. Since we believe that reality is a reflection of our inner life, Recrear’s work is designed to dig deep into young people’s hearts and souls (Recrear, 2016). We understand the process of doing research as transformative in itself. In her studies, (Cahill, 2007) stresses that “the
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