



Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences
Innovation, Integration and Impact

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Getting the message across

Rob Evans

In one of my research methods lectures I have a slide that says 'research that is not written up is wasted'. Although the focus on the written word may be overly narrow – as the pieces in this edition of *Qualitative Researcher* testify – the underlying idea that research needs to be communicated is reinforced, not diluted, by the recognition of different modes of presentation.

The articles all explore how qualitative research can be communicated to different audience and in media. In some cases, for example the contributions by Laurie Taylor and Nick Emmel and Andrew Clarke, the emphasis is on reaching audiences outside the academic community. In Laurie Taylor's case, the audience is the general listening public and the challenge is to popularise without simplifying. As he notes at the end of his article, demonstrating the richness of qualitative social science in this way is an important way of retaining public support for the long-term investment that research demands.

Emmel and Clark are also concerned with usefulness and public engagement. Describing a community-based research project they document the ways in which their research was taken up by different groups, becoming a resource to be used, and abused, by others. In their work, communication took place not in the set-piece interview of the radio studio but in the day-to-day interactions of their fieldwork. Here, engagement took the form of co-production as researchers and community groups worked collaboratively towards shared goals. When the same research was picked up and used by those with whom the researchers do not have such close relationships the outcome was less satisfactory. The message became distorted and evidence was misrepresented in claims that neither the researchers nor the data supported.

The other papers are more concerned with communication within the academic community, though similar concerns

about quality control and engaging your audience remain. Andrew Curtis's article examines how the use of techniques more usually associated with theatre can be used to bring qualitative data to life and thus to convey their meaning more powerfully than the written word alone. As he explains maintaining the right balance between artistic interpretation and academic integrity is the key to successfully conveying the strengths and limits of the study.

In contrast, Bob Simpson and Robin Humphrey are more concerned with that most traditional of academic forms – the PhD thesis. They describe an experiment funded under the Researcher Development Initiative designed to give students the opportunity to reflect on the process of writing and develop the skills needed to write in a way that is both engaging and insightful. Although the 'centre-piece' of the project is a residential workshop, it is worth noting that the project includes a 'writers blog', an example of the Web 2.0 developments that are discussed in more general terms in Yuwei Lin's article.

Focussing on the application of Web 2.0 applications for research, Lin describes and range of different web tools and examines the issues that arise when they are used for research networking rather than social networking. As might be expected, using new technologies demands new ways of working but also raises old problems of quality control, trust and information overload.

In some ways this takes us back to the issues faced by the producers described in Laurie Taylor's piece – when deciding what to attend to, what matters is whether the article, website, performance or meeting, has the potential to 'interest, stimulate [or] surprise' you. Whilst the articles presented here do not solve the problem of how to 'interest, stimulate [or] surprise' they do demonstrate that qualitative researchers have a wide range of means at their disposal.



Giving the media what they want

Laurie Taylor

Twelve years ago I attended a conference on 'Social Sciences and the Media'. It was billed as an analytical discussion about the relationship between the two elements of the title but quickly degenerated into a long whinge about the failure of television and particularly radio to recognise the wonderful work that was currently being done by social scientists.

Several speakers took the democratic tack. Why, they wondered at considerable length, did Radio 4 neglect the social sciences so shamefully when it found ample space for specialist programmes devoted to psychology, law, science, literature, film, and even gardening? It was, they claimed, all awfully unfair.

There was only one representative of the media on the platform, an elderly and distinguished Radio 4 producer who had been allocated the last slot of the day. When she stood up to speak there was a mild sense of anticipation in the hall. How might she respond to the daylong barrage of criticism? How could she defend the indefensible?

We soon found out. 'I'm afraid', she said, that radio and television don't really operate according to democratic principles when it comes to programme content. We don't typically sit around and ask each other what subject area is currently under-represented and then resolve to remedy the deficiency with an eight-part series. We don't think in terms of constituencies at all. Let alone academic disciplines. We think almost solely in terms of what we believe might interest, stimulate, surprise our listeners. All the programmes that you have cited are on the network for that reason. If we went down the constituency route you might well find that sociology had to take its place behind the RAC and the National Bee-Keeper's Association'.

This speech was very much in my mind when I worked with a senior producer on the programme idea that was eventually to become Thinking Allowed. In our submission we made no reference at all to academic disciplines, to sociology, economics, or political science, but instead concentrated upon how our intended programme would use qualitative research to shed new light upon such problem areas as inequality, crime, popular music, family breakdown, national identity, immigration, urban alienation, soap operas,

shopping and the changing nature of the pub.

All of this was easy enough to write down but turning it into a programme was quite another matter. We soon discovered that while we were happy enough to disregard disciplines our potential contributors were uneasy about talking outside their area. We found, for example, when we were preparing a programme on tourism that the sociological writer of an interesting monograph on the ways in which people increasingly used exotic holidays to relatively undiscovered places as a means of self-discovery was very unwilling to debate with an economist who wanted to argue that tourism was economically disadvantageous to developing countries. But wasn't there an interesting paradox to be explored? Weren't all those holiday-makers in pursuit of authenticity simultaneously denying the chance of their hosts ever developing to a stage in which that might become one of their own aims? Opportunities for self-expression had an economic cost.

This small example contains an important truth about the dissemination of research findings. So many social scientists have been socialised into their disciplines that they can often fail to recognise how these boundaries often have more to do with matters of promotion and career advancement than any epistemological reality. Listeners without a background in the social sciences have no such problem. They are not interested in whether the analysis they are hearing is from a sociological or economic or political perspective. What they want is something which hangs together, which seems to cover most of the angles, which taken altogether amounts to a plausible explanation, a telling description.

But those who are anxious to obtain a larger public hearing for their research don't merely have to suspend their disciplinary allegiances, they also have to throw away their much of their methodology. This is quite a sacrifice. Whereas there are good intellectual reasons for absenting oneself from one's discipline in order to widen the audience for one's research, the need to forget all the subtleties of how you collected the actual data is often distressing. After all, sometimes it is the very ingenuity of the methodology which gives the research its unique fla-

vour.

It is, however, sadly true, than any talk of how random samples were organised, how statistics were analysed, how respondents were questioned, is of little interest to a popular audience. You only have to listen to a typical edition of the Today programme to realise that a survey is a survey is a survey. Time and again we are told that a new study has discovered this or that without any consideration given to the validity or reliability upon which the findings are based. Although producers may try to weed out the most egregious examples – surveys conducted by mattress manufacturers which show that many people sleep unsoundly – they tend to treat most other announcements of 'new findings' as of comparable value. For some time now I've thought that the only solution to this dilemma, to a state of affairs which treats a careful well-designed three year study as equivalent to one knocked up in three months by an advertising or PR company, is to introduce some form of kite-marking. All new studies and surveys would be submitted to a panel of statistical and methodological experts who would grade them in terms of their respective validity. This might even to something to ensure that members of the general public were not so regularly made anxious by so-called findings which have about as much claim to truth as the opinions of men in public bars with loud voices.

But although I have every sympathy with researchers who fret about the manner in which their careful findings are forced to stand alongside the dubious data collected and promulgated by interest groups and PR companies, I am far less sympathetic to another of the temporal complaints made by researchers, the claim that they cannot condense the meat of their research into the limited minutes offered by the media. I have lost count of the number of researchers who have argued that they do not wish to take part in a programme because of the impossibility of condensing their work into the allotted time. This is a nonsense. Of course some reservations and qualifications will have to go by the board when time is restricted but I have yet to come across any piece of research which cannot be effectively summarised and capably illustrated in twelve minutes.

I suspect, however, that what most concerns those researchers who fret about the constraints of time is the recognition that they will no opportunity to develop what they frequently refer to as 'their theoretical framework'. They will not have a chance to explain how their work on the social class backgrounds of opera lovers arises from a deep reading of Bourdieu or how their innovative research on multiple identities on the internet springs from the recent writings of Bauman or how their investigation into new forms of marriage provides further evidence for Giddens.

But is this really such a loss? When I sit down with my producer to consider the merits of a new research paper we invariably skip the opening three or four pages in which the researcher seeks to justify, legitimate, and often elevate their findings by citing a telephone book of nominal imprimaturs. In so many cases, these references have the same function as a lamp-post to a drunk: they are there more for support than illumination. There, is though, another reason for wishing to omit much of this theoretical support

from any popular discussion of research findings. Although general listeners may not know the work of Bourdieu or Bauman or Giddens, there is a sense in which such theorists' ideas about cultural capital and liquid modernity and reflexive institutions have already permeated the general consciousness in the way that a tacit knowledge of Freud informs any reading of a modern novel. Listeners are not, as it were, starting from scratch. They can manage pretty well without the name checks.

Popularisation always carries risks. I have no way of knowing how many of the several hundred social scientists whose work has been featured on Thinking Allowed over the last ten years went away feeling that their work had been diminished by such exposure. But I am certain that such exposure is increasingly important in a time when government is constantly looking for ways to reduce central funding for research. Social scientists can no longer insist that the worth of their work is determined within the academy. They have to demonstrate its value to the public. In this respect it is good to see the ESRC

placing greater emphasis upon the dissemination of findings in its grant criteria.

This is not a backhanded way of suggesting that social science research should become more policy-oriented. By far the most popular contributions to Thinking Allowed come from ethnographers. There seems to be a general if tacit public acceptance that if you want to intervene in the world then you should have first-hand knowledge of the realities of that world, a knowledge that can only be gained by the sort of deep long-term immersion traditionally practised by ethnographers. Sadly, it is this very research which in recent years seems to have suffered most from the RAE injunction to publish, and to publish quickly.

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Research 2.0

Yuwei Lin

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 promises a peer-to-peer dynamic and interactive environment that extends beyond one-way presentation of information, and engages large numbers of Internet users to create, annotate, review, reuse, recreate, and represent the information publicized on the Web. Well-known Web 2.0 tools include wikis, blogs, folksonomies (social tagging), websites for sharing digital objects such as videos (e.g., YouTube), photos (e.g., Flickr), slides (e.g., SlideShare), bookmarks (e.g., Digg, del.icio.us, Newvine, reddit, StumbleUpon, Livejournal), professional networking specially for business contacts and job-search (e.g., LinkedIn, XING) and various other web-based social networking platforms which provide a variety of ways for users to interact (e.g., Facebook, Bebo, MySpace).

These commercial social networking websites are highly successful in modern society. From the 1995 Classmates.com to the 2008 Facebook.com, they are generally known for helping users to reconnect with lost high school classmates, and

socialise with friends. On Facebook, users can build their personal profiles, entertain each other by circulating social 'viruses' (e.g., vampire fights), comparing each other's interests and tastes (e.g., film tastes and doing quizzes), leaving social footprints on each other's webpages (e.g., write a message or post a multi-media object on each other's walls in Facebook). Some have made a comment that one would never make any enemies on Facebook; you can be friends with anyone on Facebook. These social networking websites are not just popular amongst teenagers. They are well-accepted by people in various age groups and social backgrounds. Whilst UK undergraduates create Facebook groups to protest against high tuition fee and deprived rights to education as well as using it to arrange social activities, lecturers use the same website to bring students together to discuss modules and coursework.

How is it that Facebook and many other social networking websites have been so successful? Common answers to this question are: the site is fun; you can keep in touch with friends; it's an endless proc-

ess of receiving and forwarding information; dynamic and novel things (in terms of new games and new applications in Facebook) come up every day.

So, wouldn't it be good if we could do research in such a playful fashion in a well-connected environment?

Research 2.0

In fact, the era of Research 2.0, a term commonly used to describe the extension of Web 2.0 tools to support academic and other research, is under way. Under the strong support of national and international research funders and multi-national IT corporations, we've seen the number of scientists-oriented social networking sites growing at unprecedented speed, although these services are still in their infancy, unlike the burgeoning commercial world of social networking sites.

Most of these services provide a real prospect of improving communication between scientists, increasing information flow between different research communities, the joining up of multi-scale do-

mains and platforms, capacity building for advanced research, and possibly making the research process more interactive and fun. Having surveyed a lot of them on the market, I classify them into four categories based on their purposes: 1) sites for maintaining relationships (e.g., Linked-In, Emerge¹, Facebook), 2) sites for sharing tools and resources (e.g., HubZero², SKUA³), 3) sites for sharing publications (e.g., SciVee⁴, Slideshare⁵, Plos One⁶, ACS⁷, 2Collab⁸, BioMedExperts⁹), 4) sites for sharing experiences (e.g., OpenWetWare¹⁰ and blogs). Basically all of these sites provide users with social bookmarking/tagging and creating social networks tools. And they all claim to promote a more inclusive and collaborative research community.

Apart from those who construct Research 2.0 sites, the emerging world of Research 2.0 also includes many researchers, particularly social scientists, who endeavour in developing sociological understandings of Web 2.0 (Beer and Burrows, 2007).

On the one hand, doing research in a Web 2.0 environment allows researchers to create a new discourse, replacing the static, top-down nature of Web 1.0 (Lessig, 2006; Musser and O'Reilly, 2006), but on the other hand, Research 2.0 challenges (or subverts) the traditional way of producing scientific knowledge. How do we validate the vast amount of data and information received in a well-connected Research 2.0 world? How much do we trust the integrity of the data and information providers whom we might never meet in real life? While Research 2.0 looks promising, what are the challenges we have to address?

Challenges of the adoption of Research 2.0

The National Centre for eSocial Science has been involving in the development and implementation process of some Research 2.0 sites (e.g., MyExperiment.org, OurSpaces.net). Our experiences enable us to observe and reflect some concerns over Web 2.0 approaches and tools.

1. Privacy and confidentiality

Social networking websites usually offer the features of personal profiles and online logs of personal activities online. Releasing these details publicly on a website makes some users uncomfortable; they feel their profiles and movements could be watched, monitored and screened. Aside from this concern over privacy, scientists are also reluctant to share findings with outsiders before formal publication of their findings. This

could be a result of the competitive nature of the research culture, where releasing research ideas too early might result in ideas being copied or scooped. It could also be because some data are acquired through special agreements with individual respondents, industry or other organisations, and publicising them without obtaining consent from these partners might breach the confidentiality or jeopardise commercial interests. How to address these concerns when developing social networking services for scientists is a burning question (e.g., the security issue mentioned below).

2. Distributed collaboration

Traditionally, scientists meet in laboratories, lecture rooms and conferences to discuss and exchange ideas. In the case of social sciences, many researchers' daily work involves individually analysing a few hundred variables or poring over a corpus of interview transcripts, and cosy corridor chat with colleagues for brainstorming ideas. Now, Research 2.0 sites provide a distributed environment which differs from traditional direct face-to-face meetings. Although instant messaging and many other communication tools can facilitate human interaction, some claim that they can never replace traditional face-to-face meetings because of the lack of intimacy, the loss of multiple complementary channels of communication, and the often fragmentary and sometimes time-consuming character of computer-mediated communications. Some of these concerns are associated with changing human behaviours in a ubiquitous computing environment. Another issue is how to offer support to the scientists who are puzzled by new research practices in a new era (i.e., Web 2.0 environment).

3. Technical issues

It turns out to be difficult to achieve fully collaborative research at the stage of data sharing and integration. At the simplest level, data are often stored in different formats which are not compatible. Similarly, researchers using incompatible research tools cannot easily collaborate at the data analysis stage. Such technical issues can only be solved if tool developers bear in mind the importance of interoperability at the infrastructure level and at the application domain level.

Another technical issue also vital to the development of social networking websites to support research is the security of infrastructure for sharing sensitive data as mentioned earlier. This can be done, for instance, by allowing users to create private workspace for a specific research

group and share information amongst members of this closed group.

4. Epistemological issues

Academia is well-known for its epistemological richness and diversity. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find researchers completely agreeing with each other on the epistemological status of their domain. To make Web 2.0 tools such as tagging and bookmarking useful in a multi-disciplinary environment like Research 2.0, a pressing issue is to build common 'language' for "research in the wild" (Callon & Rabeharisoa, 2003). Without linking different understandings of a phenomenon or a term, without bridging the gap between different disciplines, it will be difficult to construct and share collective knowledge.

5. Trust

Users in a Research 2.0 environment form different types of networks (e.g., scale free, small world, random). For instance, most researchers collaborate with those they are close to, those they trust. Their collaboration characterises a 'small world network' (Phelps and Schilling, 2005; Uzzi et al., 2007). Many studies have emphasised the importance of 'trust' between participants in distributed settings. The degree to which trust between researchers in a Web 2.0 environment can be established and maintained will have an impact on the quality and quantity of knowledge produced and transferred. Aside from social mechanisms for trust enhancement, technical development can also contribute to solving the problem by developing trust-aware systems (e.g., Massa & Avesani, 2004; Bonhard, 2005; Heath et al., 2006).

6. Legal issues

Legal issues, particularly those relating to intellectual property rights (IPR) and copyrights are important issues to consider in the context of peer-to-peer knowledge production. Who owns the IPR and whose efforts should be acknowledged when the work is co-developed, or re-developed in a distributed and open environment?

7. Organisational issues

Are researchers paid to socialise with their peers? How can the time researchers spend on annotating and commenting other people's work at social-networking websites be taken into account and rewarded? How will the social networking activities on Facebook, administered by a paid staff benefit the employee's organisa-

tion when any income generated will go to the commercial website provider? Practical questions like these are challenging existing organisational routines and research cultures in academia.

Conclusion

In this article, I have briefly described the potential of Research 2.0 which harnesses Web 2.0 approaches and tools for social networking across scientific research communities. I have also outlined social, technical, cultural, organisational and methodological issues concerning the adoption of Research 2.0. It is worth noting that most of these issues are both social and technical, and cannot be answered without socio-technical approaches where user participation plays a crucial role, just like what is common in the collaborative cultures of Web 2.0 (Beer and Burrows 2007). Having said that, we need more research to understand how Research 2.0 and scientific research practice will mutually shape one another. That is, not only will the uptake of Research 2.0 have an impact on research communities, participants of these social networking platforms will also guide future development of Research 2.0 by giving their feedback to the developer community. Our involvement in the development of MyExperiment.org shows that developing a useful and usable social networking site for researchers is not straightforward, and user engagement should go hand in hand at the same time with technical development. And this is where the kind of socio-technical studies the NCeSS Hub staff are engaged in will contribute.

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leagues, especially Peter Halfpenny, Meik Poschen, Rob Procter, Kenny Baird for their helpful comments.

¹ <http://elgg.jiscemerge.org.uk/>

² <http://www.hubzero.org/>

³ <http://www.myskua.org/>

⁴ <http://www.scivee.tv/>

⁵ <http://www.slideshare.net/>

⁶ <http://www.plosone.org/>

⁷ <http://exchange.chemistry.org/cms/>

⁸ <http://www.2collab.com/>

⁹ <http://www.biomedexperts.com/>

¹⁰ <http://openwetware.org/>

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User-engagement with community groups: the nature of engagement

Nick Emmel, Andrew Clark

Introduction

This paper considers user-engagement with community groups within qualitatively driven mixed method research to investigate network, neighbourhood, and community. We consider the characteristics of groups within the community, the nature of their organisation, and how representative these groups are of those they purport to represent. This characterisation allows for an investigation of rela-

tionships between researchers and community groups to better understand the nature of user-engagement.

User-engagement is an important part of research. Much of the literature on user-engagement considers policy makers and, occasionally, practitioners as the users of social research. On-going engagement with these users of research is a dominant theme (Davies et al, 2000). Smith (2007) shows how the findings from research

often find their way into policy in a fractured or partial form and rely on the promotional and entrepreneurial ways in which research findings are disseminated by researchers. The drive by researchers in the social sciences to see their findings at least informing policy has resulted in a long history of attempts to understand policy making processes and the ways in which evidence is used in policy (Weiss, 1979; Nutley et al., 2007).

Less well considered in the literature are the potential community users of research, by which we mean those who live and work in neighbourhoods. This paper considers how community organisations use research. We reflect on the groups in neighbourhood research that might use research and how these groups are understood by researchers. This characterisation of community groups facilitates an understanding of why researchers may work with some groups but not with others. We report on the ways in which research and the use of research are co-produced with some groups and why co-production does not happen with other groups. Finally we consider how research is used by groups with whom the researchers do not have an on-going relationship in the research.

The Connected Lives research

Before tackling these issues we describe the context of the research. Connected Lives is a multi-disciplinary project exploring how networks, neighbourhoods and communities are perceived and represented, as well as created and maintained in a heterogeneous inner city neighbourhood of a northern city. The diverse population includes a large group of transient students and young professionals (55% of the population are 16-29 years old) who live alongside individuals and families who have lived in the neighbourhood for many years, even generations. There is a relatively high (c.25%) black and minority ethnic population. It is in the context of this social, economic and cultural diversity and the ways in which networks and contacts are made within and between different groups that Connected Lives seeks to explain the perceptions and experiences of community.

We are using a qualitatively driven mixed method approach, including participatory mapping, walking interviews, and day diaries collected from a core group of 24 socially and culturally diverse individuals mostly aged 18 to 30. In addition, we are using traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation and ethnographic interviews, and an innovative walkaround method (Emmel and Clark, 2007), alongside the collection of secondary and historical data. In doing this research we have come across a large number of individuals, groups and institutions as we attempt to make sense of the communities transecting the neighbourhood. We have become known in the area; recognised at meetings and forums as researchers, regularly observed and greeted in the street by residents and workers and, we feel, gradually accepted as part of the daily life of the neighbourhood. We receive invitations to local celebrations and

house parties, or to call round to residents houses for tea. We are expected to attend a local community café and other events. These activities have encouraged us to consider how embedded we are in the neighbourhood and how we are seen.

We are not locals in the area. Rather, our legitimacy in the field site is based on repeated reminders that we engage with groups in the community for a specific research purpose. Like many field researchers, we are frequently asked to explain the research - its aims and purpose, to justify why we have selected this particular neighbourhood as the field site and to comment on our progress. Moreover, we are also asked 'what we hope to find out?' and, as our research advances, 'what benefits the research might bring to the neighbourhood and its residents?'. In the process, we do not consider these interactions as just ethnographic encounters. They also offer insight into the ways in which the research, and indeed researchers, might be used.

Identifying and characterising user groups in our research

In getting to know our research site and becoming known within it we have come across a varied collection of potential users of our research. These include residents groups, community safety groups, community development workers, pressure groups, local voluntary Third Sector organisations, and ad hoc groups of participants and others who live or work in the neighbourhood. All of whom, we suggest, are not just necessarily a potentially interested audience for the research, but also may want to use the research to achieve particular outcomes or to present themselves in particular ways to others. These groups, we have learnt, have particular sectoral issues they want to address. Amongst these are issues such as housing in multiple occupancy; the impact of student residents; the uses of open and green spaces; and addressing the needs of particular excluded, marginalised, or vulnerable groups.

Broadly, we have identified three approaches to organisation among these groups. Local-focused groups, in particular Third Sector organisations, are concerned to respond directly to felt need in the communities they see themselves as serving. But these organisations are increasingly obliged to respond to and deliver particular services defined by external bodies in competitive tendering processes for funds. Political-local groups are active in political spheres of influence; attending and holding meetings at the city hall and maintaining strong links with local author-

ity councillors. Finally, local-national groups link their local pressure groups with national campaigns and lobby for changes through the use of websites and national networks.

A further dimension to our analysis of the characteristics of these groups is our understanding of how representative these groups are of those they purport to represent. We have learnt that some groups lay claim to particular viewpoints which are at odds with the views expressed by participants in the research. Typical of these differing viewpoints are approaches towards the large student population in the field-site. Political-local groups, in particular, present a polarised view of the student population as troublesome, noisy, and often antisocial. Participants in the research and local-focused groups, however, present a more nuanced view of the formal (and informal) economic, social, and cultural benefits of students to the area.

As researchers we work with groups using all three approaches to organisation. However, our willingness to engage with groups beyond data collection, who we analyse as less representative of the community is limited. We feel more comfortable supporting and encouraging some groups to use our research because they offer a more nuanced account of sections of the community. Their view of the communities they work with is closer to our findings and analysis in the research. Given our ideological position in the research we are more likely to support groups that aim to promote community interaction and cohesion, or speak for more marginalised or excluded individuals. We are less willing to engage in an ongoing dialogue with groups that create division, or have a polarised and partisan view of the neighbourhood. However, the findings from the Connected Lives research is now in the public domain. The findings are being used by groups with whom we engage and by groups with whom we have limited contact. It is not just those users who we, as researchers feel comfortable with who have used our research. The ways in which research is used by different community groups provide insights into the nature of use of our research.

How the research is used

Reflecting on the ways in which our research has been used we identify two important themes. The first is co-production, in which the researchers and users work together towards producing outputs from the research that are beneficial to both the users and to the research.

The second theme is one of appropriation of research results. Here, the legitimacy of our research is recognised by users. The results of the research are used towards particular ends over which the researchers have little if any control.

Co-production requires an on-going relationship between users and researchers, where outputs are identified that are perceived to be of value to both parties. Examples of co-production include the co-development of resources, such as compilations of area statistical indicators for neighbourhood reviews, funding applications, and to monitor and evaluate representation of existing groups and centres. In particular these research outputs have been used by local-focussed groups to develop neighbourhood audits for residents associations. These audits have in turn been used as base documents for the construction of a neighbourhood profile for future planning and funding opportunities and as comparative documents against which locally-focussed organisation could check their own targets and client groups, for instance. One voluntary organisation has altered how it monitors and evaluates its activities in order to check its client groups against the area demographics developed through the Connected Lives research. Community groups have also drawn on other resources from the research, such as the use of photographs taken by the researchers to use on local leaflets and displays in the community.

These interactions all include a co-production of knowledge as user-engagement. The researchers have provided expertise; advice on survey development and analysis to voluntary community and residents groups. At the same time, these groups have furnished the research with further insights into the place that directly addresses our research questions. And, on occasions, assist as gatekeepers in providing access to potential participants.

Through these contacts we also contribute to the co-production of networks in the field site. We have, at least for a short while, become part of the networks we are seeking to understand. As we have noted, in the research we attend meetings, go to events, and engage with groups that hold different views and organise in different ways in the field. These groups are not necessarily in contact with each other, indeed there are often antipathies between groups. Nonetheless, because, as we have discussed, our identity is that of researchers, we are seen as a bridge between groups. Our knowledge is used by those with whom we have contact in the

field. As A notes in his field-notes (12th December, 2007):

...we talk about a [third sector] network they have not been to for a while – clearly I am now a means of disseminating information and known as someone with a ‘finger on the pulse’ of what’s going on. ... We talk about the implications of the funding cuts to third sector services – which S and J run. S and J are keen to quiz me about what LP said in the meeting about this.
(field notes, 12th December 2007)

The ability to co-produce knowledge is further extended through the ways in which the Connected Lives research is seen as recognising the importance of the area. In field notes, (A-16th January 2008), a participant, O, in common with several participants in the research, talks about the “*the significance of our research*” and about it being “*an example of how people are paying attention to the problems and issue in the area*” Flowing from these observations, the research was used as evidence by O and colleagues to make a case for the preservation of green spaces in the research site in deputation to the local authority. We consider this an example of the way in which the research is used in an entrepreneurial way by groups, in collaboration with the researchers, to promote the agenda of these community groups.

These co-production activities in our research contribute to the nuanced understanding we are generating in the research about networks, neighbourhoods, and communities. These results are also made available in the public domain, most often during the research through the co-production activities we have described. These results are, in turn, appropriated by other users with whom we do not have such close relationships. Here we see our research used in ways over which we have no control.

We have seen our results used in a fractured way to support partisan positions and partial readings that seek to discredit the research. An example of the fracturing of the research is shown in an example of multiple occupancy residences and the rubbish produced by the residents of these rented houses. One group, which campaigns against multiple-occupancy renting in the area, has highlighted the observations we have made about the persistent problems of refuse disposal, without also providing the rich context we describe as to why the problem arise and ignore how tenants try to address this problem and the structural constraints placed upon the local authority to deal

with rubbish collection within the wider context of the provision of services across the city. A further example involves the undermining of unfavourable research results through a partial reading of the analysis in the research. On one occasion, for instance, a map of crime was derided by a community group who, without reporting the research findings, assumed a causal relationship between crime and a group they purport to represent.

Conclusion

In common with observations made about user-engagement with policy makers and practitioners, three similar themes emerge from our reflections on user-engagement with community groups. These are on-going engagement with users, a promotional and entrepreneurial approach, and a loss of control that sees the results from research used in a partisan and fractured way. We have observed how on-going engagement is possible only with some community groups, because there is a similarity in ideological position between these community groups and the researchers. These relationships promote on-going dialogue, which encourages co-production of resources that directly benefit both the research and the user groups. In the research we collect data from other groups, but do not actively engage in the co-production of resources in the research. Nonetheless, these groups also recognise the value of part of our findings to promote their own causes and use these findings in a partial way over which researchers have no control. Other users see the potential influence of our research and seek to undermine its results. Common themes emerge across the analysis of user-engagement but further reflections on the nature of engagement are needed when considering community users of research.

¹ There is an important literature on user engagement in health, which is not considered in this paper. The particular ways in which user engagement policy is interpreted and implemented by health professionals and their relationships with clients has been considered by Fudge et al., (2008)

² Connected Lives is part of the Manchester / Leeds ESRC Real Life Node of the National Centre for Research Methods Grant ref 576255017

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How dramatic techniques can aid the presentation of qualitative research

Andrew Curtis

Introduction

It is a familiar scenario: someone making a lengthy presentation about qualitative research, reading long quotations off of an overhead projector or PowerPoint. It can often be quite a laboured, even tortuous, process. This article examines an alternative approach that can enhance such a presentation while considering whether it lessens the academic credibility of the work. A recent attempt at such a presentation and the implications of 'dramatising' qualitative research will also be outlined. It should be noted from the outset that it is not proposed that this method is a replacement for more conventional presentation of qualitative research, but rather that it is held up as an innovative alternative in certain circumstances.

Qualitative research can be especially conducive to being presented verbally. As Walker notes: 'the understanding acquired through the very personal, frequently interactive process of qualitative research is often best conveyed through verbal presentation and discussion' (Walker, 1985: 180). Recently various educational research has also been presented through a range of performance arts including: dance, theatre, music, and poetry (see Bagley and Cancienne, 2002).

The research project that will be referred to in this article examines retention and progression at a new university located in south-west London. Various interviews

were conducted and numerous questionnaires distributed as part of the research. A recurring problem was trying to present the data in a way that was engaging, because many practitioners (both academic and non-academic) are pressed for time and are constantly bombarded with a great deal of disparate research findings.

In this article verbatim theatre and its more academic based equivalent ethnodrama are briefly scrutinised. Then the most fruitful way of preparing qualitative data for presentation is considered, and a workshop held in March 2006 using the technique is outlined. Finally the ethical implications of such presentations are discussed.

The rise of verbatim theatre

In recent years there has been an increase in verbatim theatre productions in the United States and the United Kingdom. This comes from a tradition of documentary theatre and entails a dramatic performance where transcripts of real events and conversations are performed, often by actors. David Hare's *The Permanent Way*, which looks at railway privatisation and the subsequent rise in rail disasters, and *Stuff Happens*, which examines the war in Iraq, are recent high profile examples of this.

Paget is often credited with identifying the

emergence of verbatim theatre. He defines it as 'a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping of and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things' (Paget, 1987: 317). Yet it has to be borne in mind that these plays come from a theatrical tradition, often with few methodological considerations. The most problematic aspect of verbatim theatre is that often some segments are fictionalised, therefore it is difficult to know what in the performance are actually verbatim quotations and what has been added.

Verbatim theatre was examined to see whether it could provide our workshop with innovative ways of presenting ethnographic research. From the outset there was caution about falling into the trap of producing a 'gimmick' when trying different techniques, where the 'dramatic' takes precedence over a balanced and rigorous presentation. This led to questioning of how appropriate it is to let qualitative material 'stand alone' (presenting quotes without having continual academic commentary). An example of this 'stand alone' approach in written text is the work of Studs Terkel. Terkel has produced numerous books of oral history based around various themes, such as people's experiences of working (2004 [1970]). The collections contain a series of short first-person narratives, with no sustained analysis or commentary. Yet this was deemed

inappropriate for our presentation as we had to contextualise the work with other research and refer to various concepts.

Ethnodrama

There are more academic, opposed to theatrical, based examples of the form. Mienczakowski has used dramatic techniques to present ethnographic health research, and terms this 'ethnodrama'. Morgan, Mienczakowski and Smith assert that ethnodrama is 'subjected to the same academic rigor applied to other research methodologies' (Morgan et al., 2001: 165). Originally these dramas tended to be fictionalised from ethnographic research and subsequently validated by participants. Significantly, Mienczakowski's later ethnodramas, such as *Busting*, which looks at the experiences of staff and clients in an Australian detox centre, are constructed mainly out of verbatim transcripts. This was due to the informants' demands: 'in the perceptions of the 'Busting' informants fictionalized inclusions were of less worth than direct verbatim transcription' (Mienczakowski, 1995: 363).

The key benefit of presenting data in such a form is that it is more accessible and can have greater emotional impact. Yet more recently there have been ethical concerns raised about ethnodrama and the emotions it can potentially unleash. Morgan et al. emphasise the need for formal post-production discussions about any issues raised because of this (2001: 172-6).

Mienczakowski, Smith and Morgan assert that ethnodrama seeks to reduce authorial guidance: 'within ethnodramas conclusions are drawn by audiences during performances and are tested in post-performance forum sessions' (2002: 49). This could potentially limit presentations of broader projects that feature ethnographic research. Rogers, Frellick, and Babinski, who have also successfully staged an academic study, have certain reservations about the form because of this: 'we have some concern that presenting the data in an unmediated fashion, with no interpretation or guidance from the researchers, may lead to misinterpretation' (Rogers et al., 2002: 68).

It is also important to note that Mienczakowski's work is specific to health settings and aimed at mainly non-academic audiences. Because of this, great care has to be taken in ethnodrama not to upset vulnerable spectators and performances often try to end with messages of hope (Mienczakowski et al. 2002: 42).

Preparation and rehearsal

For our own presentation, we felt that while dramatic techniques could be used, certain liberties should not be taken with the text. Therefore neither of the approaches outlined above were entirely suitable for our project. Dramatists ultimately have to consider the theatrical value of a piece. Yet ethnographic research demands in-depth analysis, not just highlighting those incidents that are the most interesting or dramatic. Mienczakowski's ethnodrama approach also had limitations for our work as it has to consider the sensibilities of a sometimes fragile audience, which did not apply to our situation.

It was decided that two sets of qualitative data would be presented in the workshop: firstly from focus groups of students still attending the university, and secondly written comments from a questionnaire of students that had withdrawn. There was a read-through of the scripts with one of the student readers, which was very insightful. The student – who studies drama – voiced various opinions and recommended that the script be cut, especially because she felt the comments became repetitive and lost their impact after ten minutes or so (originally it was over fifteen minutes). After some consideration this recommendation was followed and quotes reflecting a similar theme (i.e. dissatisfaction with the same aspect of university life) were removed. Ten minutes (in two five minute segments) seemed to be the optimum length for such a generalised subject.

Two speakers, one female and one male, were used. Both were third years in their early twenties. As accuracy was deemed more important than dramatic impact, the students read from hand-held scripts. Word-for-word memorisation was possible of course, but would have needed a much greater amount of rehearsal.

The workshop

The performance was part of a two-and-a-half hour workshop looking at why students might be unhappy and what might cause them to leave university. It was an important ingredient in mixing modes of presentation in order to maintain engagement. Prior to the readings a general introduction was provided, including the general themes that had emerged from the ethnographic research.

The student readers were able to capture the vernacular of young adults perfectly, which is often lost when read out conven-

tionally. Some of the more casual language sounded much more convincing than when spoken by an older member of staff. As the comments were generic (focusing on the negative aspects of university life) a multitude of quotes could be offered without immediate supporting information. One reader would recite a comment then the other student would read another, indicating a change in respondent.

The first segment was based on transcripts of interviews and flowed more easily than the second because the speakers found it easier to capture the rhythm of the piece. For example, this interviewee had complained about the conservatism of fellow students, especially considering they lived in London:

It's kind of become like this university's a haven – it's in London but it's not scary, 'don't worry guys, you don't have to get night buses'.

The colloquialisms and rhetorical conversation style are difficult to understand when reading the quote on the page for the first time, yet it is immediately comprehensible when read aloud with the right intonation. The 'don't worry guys' expression would not necessarily be emphasised in a formal academic presentation, where the tone tends to remain neutral, but the sting of contempt was effectively conveyed by the student reader.

The audience reaction to the first piece was quite startling and there was a spontaneous round of applause. There was a discussion of the issues raised before moving onto the second piece. After a short introduction about the questionnaire and its results the readers then read written comments from students that had withdrawn. This was slightly less successful than the first part of the performance because it entailed reading the written word. While it did convey important data effectively, it did so in a slightly more leaden fashion than in the first part.

Overall, the informal feedback was very positive and the audience were keen to thank the readers in the break afterwards. The readings undoubtedly made a strong impact. For example, some staff were shocked that a couple of students had been the subject of racist and homophobic remarks, and this was all the more forcibly conveyed by a first person dramatic representation.

Ethical issues

The main ethical issue with the technique

(which was identified prior to the workshop) was that an over-enthusiastic reader may caricature one of the interviewees/respondents. An interviewee might not be very articulate, which might be interpreted as the reader lampooning them. Great care was taken to coach the readers to perform the works expressively but not to put on humorous voices and accents or to overemphasise any idiosyncracies of language. If the comments had intentionally amusing elements, as many did, this could be conveyed by a relatively 'straight' reading. In addition, sufficient discussion time was allocated for any issues that might be raised.

Conclusion

It has been asserted that the use of readers can be useful when presenting qualitative research. This can range from an additional speaker for reading out long quotations, to fully dramatised segments. When ethnographic research is "enacted" it can undoubtedly have a great impact. Yet this can potentially unleash strong emotional responses, so there should always be prior consideration of this and a post-performance discussion scheduled. We felt that the gain in dramatic impact should never be at the expense of analysis when presenting qualitative research. Another concern with more elaborate ethnodrama, which was not attempted in our workshop, is the use of textual embellishments and fictionalisation. This is a departure from verbatim quotations and needs to be made explicit. While this is perfectly appropriate for Mienczakowski's work, which places great value on awareness-raising and participant validation, it was not suitable for our particular presentation. In addition, the absence of a formal authorial voice can be problematic if the

research is not discussed in its broader context.

Dramatic techniques can certainly enhance presentation of qualitative research and convey the rhythms of the spoken word more effectively. More generally, ethnodrama can provide greater accessibility to research than if it was only available in more formal academic settings. Overall, it is believed that dramatic techniques have much to offer qualitative researchers, but only when used sparingly and with caution.

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Writing across boundaries: Explorations in research, writing and rhetoric in qualitative research

Bob Simpson, Robin Humphrey

In recent years, significant progress has been made training researchers in the use of qualitative methods at masters and doctoral level. As a result, using qualitative methodologies is no longer quite the mystery that it once was. Greater efforts are now made to communicate just what is going on when we carry out interviews (structured, semi-structured, open-ended conversational, biographical, case study

etc) as well as in more experiential and naturalistic techniques such as participant-observation and ethnography. However, there is one piece of alchemy with which many researchers continue to struggle and that is the art of turning the base metal of qualitative data into the gold that is clear, engaging, articulate and persuasive writing. The move from volumes of qualitative data in the form of transcripts, writ-

ten descriptions, photographs, notes, diaries and informant-generated accounts into carefully crafted textual representations tends to be left to students to figure out for themselves. It is often missed off ESRC Research Training Programmes, Roberts generic training, and it is something that individual supervisors tend to assume their students either can or cannot do (Wiles *et al.*, 2005:34). The upshot of

this is that for many social science students, the early stages of moving from data to text can involve the negotiation of a very scary gap and it is certainly one that we remember well from our own time as post-graduates. The Writing Across Boundaries project is funded under the ESRC's Researcher Development Initiative and offers ways of bridging this gap. It is an attempt to provide PhD students who are at an advanced stage in their analysis of qualitative data with the opportunity to reflect on the process of writing in the social sciences.

The centre-piece of the project is an annual, residential workshop held in Durham. Access is currently restricted to students in the five North-East Universities but will be opened out to wider constituencies for 2009. The first workshop ran very successfully at Easter in 2007 and the second one took place in Durham between 31st March and 1st April 2008. The workshops are supplemented by on-going support in the form of a web-site on which can be found information, references, web-links, book reviews and news of forthcoming events: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries>. There is also an on-line community for qualitative researchers to participate in: <http://groups.google.com/group/writing-across-boundaries>

The pitch of the workshops is important. We are not offering remedial support for students in their writing and do not provide advice on the technicalities of writing, such as the perennial questions of referencing and citation? What we are offering is an opportunity for some in-depth reflection, in the safety of a group of fellow-travellers, on what is going on when researchers write up a piece qualitative research. It is our hope that the opportunity to reflect in this way will get students thinking about their writing at a far more sophisticated level; that they will negotiate the later stages of writing-up more productively and make even more effective use of supervisory in-put. At the end of the last workshop, and six months on, we conducted some careful evaluation among participants and their supervisors. The results of this feedback have been both interesting and gratifying. Writer's block takes many forms, with most stemming from issues of confidence and an inability to unlock the potential that is so

evidently there. The feedback suggested that the workshop had worked well in this regard; many students reported that they had realised that they could exercise control over their writing and experienced a kind of liberation. Interestingly, one supervisor commented that this leap across, or perhaps into, the scary gap, could not have come from within the supervisor-student relation but had to be in some sense external to that relationship.

To accomplish the leap, the workshop involves a mix of presented material [invited speakers and a panel of recently completed PhD students], participatory exercises, film and other visual materials. Perhaps, most important of all, however, is the opportunity to mix with researchers from other disciplines and to realise that the pleasures and pains of making quality texts is common to all. The workshop also focuses in on particular problems and issues that come with writing in ways that are rarely achievable outside of a residential workshop. In the context of the workshop, students are made more aware of the variety of literary and creative strategies used in the writing up of qualitative research (for egs, Becker, 1986; Van Mannen 1988; Walcott, 2001). For example, thinking of writing as being rhetorical or narratological raises issues of subject positioning, reflexivity and audiences (Carrithers 2005). Thinking about writing in this way encourages students to reflect upon the relationship between writing and analysis generally and more specifically upon writing itself as a form of thinking which is integral to the process of analysis (Chenail, 1995). We also encouraged students, with the help of a Charles Fernyhough, a novelist and teacher of creative writing, to think about the use of plots and sequencing in qualitative writing. Having got students to think of a chapter of their thesis as a sequence of linked elements with each episode written on a record card, Fernyhough then had them toss the cards in the air. The randomly re-assembled cards proved a revelation for many; some felt that the new ordering gave, at the very least, new insights into how they might structure chapters; others claimed that the new ordering was going to be how they will actually structure their chapters! In this way, students were coaxed away from their tried and trusted traditional approaches and began to contemplate new

and experimental forms of writing in which it wasn't just that what they were writing about that was original but the way they might write about it could also be.

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News and Forthcoming Events

NCRM Events

ESRC Research Methods Festival 2008

30 June—3 July 2008

St Catherine's College, Oxford

The Festival aims to engage social scientists across a wide range of disciplines and sectors and at different points in their research careers. We are aiming to stimulate interest, raise issues, highlight opportunities and showcase new developments

<http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/RMF2008/festival/index.php>

Vital Signs: Researching Real Life

9-11 September 2008

University of Manchester

Vital Signs is an international and interdisciplinary conference organised by Real Life Methods. It will provide a major forum for the discussion of approaches to researching real lives in complex worlds.

<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/events/vitalsigns/index.htm>

Conferences

BERA Annual Conference 2008

3-6 September 2008

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

Fourth International Conference on e-Social Science

18-20 June, 2008

Manchester

The aim of the conference on e-Social Science is to bring together leading international representatives of the social science, e-Infrastructure/cyberinfrastructure and e-Research communities in order to improve mutual awareness, harmonize understanding and instigate coordinated activities to accelerate research, development and deployment of powerful, new research methods and tools for the social sciences and beyond.

<http://www.ncess.ac.uk/events/conference/>

2nd International Conference: Representing Childhood and Youth

8-10 July 2008

Sheffield

This conference will explore the ways in which childhood and youth are represented as life course categories and how in changing cultural and historical contexts these categories are beginning to be questioned and often re-presented. This process of reflection and review can be seen taking place in a variety of different ways, which are addressed by the conference strands.

<http://www.cscv.group.shef.ac.uk/conferences/index.htm>

Society for the Social Studies of Science (4S) and European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST) 2008 Joint Annual Meeting

20-23 August 2008

Rotterdam, Netherlands

<http://www.easst.net/node/1599/>

Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Annual International Conference: "Youth Matters? Critical geographies of youth policy and practice"

27-29 August 2008

University of Manchester

<http://www.rgs.org/WhatsOn/ConferencesAndSeminars/Annual+International+Conference/Annual+International+Conference+2008.htm>

The 7th Qualitative Research Conference

8-10 September 2008

Bournemouth University

This biannual conference has particular concern to support disciplinary diversity. Abstracts are invited from scholars and practitioners engaged in qualitative research from a range of disciplines which may include health, social care, psychology, sociology, anthropology, media studies, education, organisational studies and any other disciplines through which qualitative research is being advanced.

<http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/hsc/qrc08.html>

Oxford e-Research Conference 08

13 September 2008

University of Oxford

The conference will bring together research from key e-Research projects from around the world examining the role of the Internet, Web and the Grid in research.

Additional details online:

<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/eresearch08/>

Workshops / Other Events

Workshop on Research 2.0

2nd CALL FOR CONTRIBUTORS

18 June 2008

Manchester

(To be held in conjunction with the 4th International e-Social Science conference, 18-20 June 2008, <http://www.ncess.ac.uk/events/conference/>)

Building Capacity in Visual Methods—Visual Methods Symposium

10 July 2008

Wolfson College, Oxford

Presentations from: Marcus Banks, David Gauntlett, Sarah Pink and Jon Prosser
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For more information or to book a place, please contact the Project Administrator Louise Williams by email at l.williams@leeds.ac.uk or by phone (0113) 343 4586; Fax (0113) 343 4541 or visit our website at: <http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/research/visual-methods/>

EUROQUAL—Using multi-methods in Social Science

1-3 September 2008

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