Methods for Change

Participatory Film Making

Prof. Andrew Irving, *The University of Manchester,*
Robyn Swannack and Nenio Mbazima,
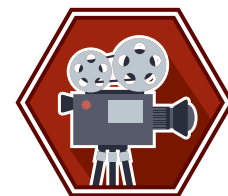*University of the Witwatersrand*

Dr Amy Barron, and Dr Laura Pottinger,
The University of Manchester

Corresponding author
*Prof. Andrew Irving*
andrew.irving@manchester.ac.uk

Participatory Film Making

Participatory Film Making involves working collaboratively with people using photography and film making to generate new knowledge and understandings about the perspectives and experiences of a particular group or community.

This method involves training participants to become film makers and co-researchers through guided learning and by teaching techniques such as composition and editing. The collaborative nature of this method means it is effective in displacing power relationships and can make participating in research and the creation of knowledge more inclusive and rewarding. Participatory Film Making involves identifying relevant themes and areas of interest and concern with those you are working with; investigating key themes and issues through photography and film; developing and discussing these areas through making creative outputs, which then feed into peer learning and follow-on exercises. This method is therefore cyclical and is driven by practice, whereby each process informs the next.

In this method, photography and film making are seen as both life enhancing skills to be taught to participants, and an appropriate and effective pedagogical mechanism for exploring issues, topics and questions, including difficult or sensitive areas that other approaches might struggle to address. The skills participants acquire through their involvement in Participatory Film Making can then be used long after the research has ended. Participatory Film Making is concerned with both the process of learning and the end result. Developing film and photography skills together allows participants to feel included and involved in the research process and has additional benefits in terms of establishing social relations and group dynamics. Having co-researchers who are already embedded in the communities and contexts you are interested in can also be particularly valuable when researching sensitive topics or when working in different cultural contexts. Indeed, this method can be used to ask and address a range of questions and issues that may not lend themselves to other approaches, such as conventional interviews, questionnaires or textual methods. For example, when working in informal contexts, with vulnerable groups or children, they can facilitate a better understanding of people's lived experiences.

Participatory Film Making
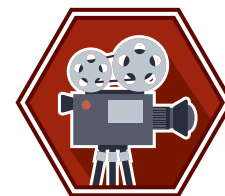
How does Participatory Film Making create or contribute to change?

Participatory Film Making is in part concerned with the processes of change that happen as participants acquire the skills to become film makers. Because this method employs iteration and collaborative learning, it is not always desirable or possible to determine in advance what will be changed as a result of the skills gained. The question of change is therefore defined by what emerges through the participative process. For example, incidental learning (outcomes that are as unanticipated as they are valuable and new areas of knowledge) often emerge through the participatory process.

Participatory Film Making can be particularly useful in understanding and communicating the lives and experiences of marginalised or excluded groups. To give an example, which is discussed in more detail later, it has been used in research with deaf communities who are commonly excluded from mainstream learning contexts and the broadcast medium. The films created can facilitate a change in public knowledge and awareness about that community. Film presents a way of documenting society and culture that is accessible, inclusive and easily digestible to a wide range of people, meaning it is more likely to have far reaching influences. Change can also occur in a more fundamental way for participants, by changing the way somebody understands themselves and their capacities. For instance, in terms of understanding their personal and collective identity, communicative abilities, self-reflexivity and problem solving abilities.
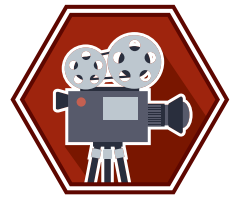
Participatory Film Making can also be used with a specific agenda in mind, such as making a film about the devastating effects of the destruction of the rainforest, opening up discussion and debate on a local issue, raising public awareness about health or influencing policy. The purpose of this film would then be to change people's perceptions or to make an intervention into government debates about that topic.

What ideas or concepts influence Participatory Film Making?

The use of film and photography is commonplace in the discipline of anthropology. Visual anthropology uses ethnographic methods - which are concerned with developing in-depth, intimate and ongoing relationships with people - with a medium that can communicate in ways that are different from writing, such as film.

This method is also influenced by a move toward more inclusive and participatory methods in the social sciences which emphasise working with or alongside participants, but it pushes participation a step further. Participatory Film Making begins from the premise that all visual methods are participatory and collaborative, because participants are always involved, and permission is needed to engage with them. It is driven by a desire for inclusivity and often starts with asking: 'who can participate?'. This question is not only of concern to those people who are being taught film making skills, but also to those who are delivering the teaching of those skills. This method recognises that the people that researchers work with have the capacity to be their own theorists about their social life and their ways of being. Training someone who is part of the group or context you are researching is important because they are likely to be more aware of the needs, enthusiasms, sensitivities, languages and experiences of the participants. The people who are trained to use the method can then act as mediators between those delivering the skills and techniques, and those learning them.
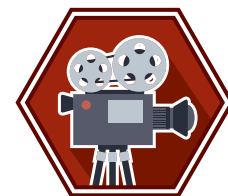
Participatory Film Making

Why might I want to use Participatory Film Making?

- Participatory Film Making can be used to investigate, share or tell a story. For example, it might be used by an activist to make an intervention into public discourse; to share knowledge and information that is relevant across a given community for educational purposes; or to give a voice to under-represented and marginalised groups.

- Participatory Film Making has the potential to educate those who engage with produced films about the challenges of being part of that marginalised group by highlighting the different practices and processes that comprise their lived experiences.

- Being involved in Participatory Film Making is often educational and fun, equipping participants with new skills in media production that can be used long after the research project has ended.

- The introduction to and use of the video camera by participants often involves a process of attunement and attention that establishes a new awareness and relationship between people, their bodies and their surroundings.

- Participatory Film Making can offer insight into how participants view their world in the processes of planning compositions and working together with other participants, as well as through the choices about how to portray their experience to others, whether implicitly or explicitly.

- The process of playing with a camera can provide opportunities for participants to respond creatively and imaginatively to the world around them and to engage with new technologies.

Nenio Mbazima Teaching Framing Techniques

Participatory Film Making

Step by step guide to using Participatory Film Making

Before using Participatory Film Making, it is important to build an effective team that has the technical expertise and cultural knowledge for the research to be effective. If you are looking to work with someone who has experience of film making, please see the list of further reading.

1. **Listening.** Start by asking: what are the main issues faced by the group involved in the research? A key part of Participatory Film Making is ensuring the people you work with feel confident and supported to generate ideas. It is important to identify people in the community who can act as cultural brokers or translators, and to train those people to deliver these skills themselves. Listening is crucial, especially initially because you are trying to identify issues and topics that are important to that community. It is vital to establish a mutually defined set of aims and objectives between the team and the group.

2. **Method.** The next stage involves setting a series of different exercises through which participants can learn a particular skill. These skills might include how to effectively frame or compose a picture around a theme you are exploring. Set an exercise that is open enough to go in different directions. Make sure you include time for exploration and expression where the participants are free to do what they like with cameras and to photograph what they please. It is important for learners to feel they can take control over this process and run with it. This often generates interesting insights and allows you to understand what is significant to the participants. Examples of different exercises are outlined below, and examples of where Participatory Video has been used can be found via Insight Share :

   - You might want to do an exercise that is about getting people to represent their emotions through film using everyday objects and scenes around them. This exercise aims to provide a structure to open a discussion about the emotions that are important for the people you are working with. The participants define the content and character of the visual materials for themselves.

   - A different exercise could involve getting participants to create a portrait around a particular theme. For example, if you were researching 'social isolation with older people', participants may be instructed to create a portrait to represent 'friendship' as an antidote to isolation. This step is about teaching participants to create an effective portrait that will reveal something about their character. Participants might be taught how to effectively juxtapose a person with an object, for example, or how to put different elements into a frame through effective balance and composition.

   - Another activity might involve telling a story in 24 images. This begins the process of translating photography into film making.

3. **Showing, discussion and peer-learning.** The next step involves bringing the group of participants together to discuss the photographs and films that have been created. The point here is to engage in peer-learning, as participants talk constructively through their ideas and images together. The group should consider the aesthetics of the image, discussing what does and does not work in relation to the theme being conveyed. Through this discussion, participants are developing new skills and will use these discussions to inform the creation and composition of their next image.
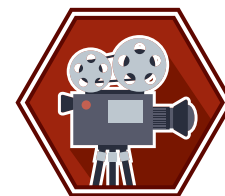
Participatory Film Making
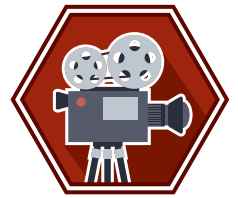
Step by step guide to using Participatory Film Making

As facilitators, it is important to give participants the space to discuss things among themselves and identify what works and what does not. Listen to what the participants are saying and what they are identifying as important. For example, some participants may be discussing the barriers they experience to forming friendships. Barriers to forming friends could then become the subject for the next photograph exercise.

4. **Sharing.** The outputs you have created can then be shared widely with the public as well as directly interested stakeholders. How the film is shared will depend on the goal of the research. It might be used to open discussion and debate on a local issue; to raise public awareness; to influence policy; to change people's perceptions; or to make an intervention into government debates about a topic.

Participatory Film Making in Action

Participatory Film Making

An example of Participatory Film Making in social science research

Enhancing resilient deaf youth in South Africa

Researchers: Prof. Andrew Irving, Prof. Alys Young, Dr Lorenzo Ferrarini, Dr Katherine Rogers; The University of Manchester, and Prof. Claudine Storbeck, University of the Witwatersrand.

Trigger warning: understanding child abuse and safeguarding

The project worked alongside two non-governmental organisations based in South Africa offering early intervention and parent support services, HI HOPES and THRIVE, and six schools for the deaf, four in KwaZulu-Natal and two in Gauteng. Through a creative interdisciplinary collaboration between visual anthropology, social science and deaf studies, the project set out to enhance resilience among deaf youth in South Africa through the medium of film and photography using a series of interactive workshops with deaf young people. The project was built around specific objectives for promoting positive aspirations, well-being and to work with Participatory Flm Making and other methods in order to establish child-led interventions to support emotional literacy and youth safeguarding (for example, as ways of understanding how to assist young, deaf people from becoming victims of sexual violence). In doing so, photography and film were used to open up a creative space of learning to think about, explore and better understand a range of critical issues that can be difficult for pupils to engage with in other learning contexts. It also gave pupils the opportunity to identify and actively work on topics they themselves considered important in their own lives, families and communities.

The project objectives were:

- Through a child and community authored method, to involve deaf youth in the making and production of a series of 'this is me - this is my future' films;

- To support the development of parent-child social and emotional interactions;

- To develop a series of 'growing up and keeping safe' films aimed specifically at deaf young people.

In this project, young people were not understood as research subjects from whom information should be elicited. Instead, a pedagogical approach based on practice-based participation, guided learning, play and improvisation were combined to create a learning context to reveal, as well as generate, understandings that may otherwise have remained unarticulated. Film was a particularly suitable method to use when researching with deaf children because a strong visual orientation to the world is often considered central to deaf cultural identity.

The young people were initially taught visual methods, including photography, film making and editing by the researchers. Once they had carried out the training, they were then able to teach these methods to their peers. The young participants had a greater cultural awareness and understanding of the lives of other deaf children in this context than the
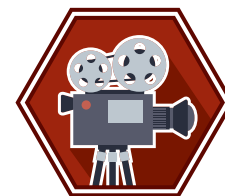
Participatory Film Making
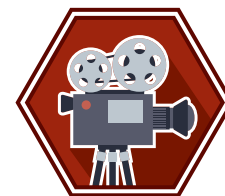
academic researchers, and were therefore particularly successful in teaching these skills sensitively and appropriately.

One aspect of the project involved understanding safeguarding and child sexual exploitation, and learning more about the different situations in which children and young people might be groomed by adults (in order to build upon this knowledge to establish approaches for safeguarding for the deaf community). One Participatory Film Making activity involved the participants scripting a story. The young people were asked to come up with a set of scenarios around this theme and then to enact that story in front of the camera.

In this context, the use of film and visual methods offers an educational resource and effective pedagogical means for delivering content to young people by capitalising on their interest in the social and creative use of images. Photography and filmmaking allow for individual learning but are also shared and participatory processes that create opportunities for social and peer learning, for facilitating personal and collective understandings about how to negotiate challenging life experiences that can be carried throughout life. Through a series of visual exercises, the young people were also learning a set of skills around film making and photography which they then could use in other ways. Importantly, this method was also enjoyable, and provided an opportunity

to destabilise existing power structures which may have been reproduced had participants instead been asked to write about their experiences, for example. Beginning with the existing visual lifeworlds and everyday knowledge of participants, (in this case the visual orientations and understandings of deaf young people) Participatory Film Making practice offers an inclusive means for researching and representing subjects and themes of mutually defined interest and concern.

The films and photographs created in the wider project were then exhibited in different public contexts - such as the KwaZulu Natal Society of the Arts Gallery, Durban and the Children's Museum of the Arts, New York - taking the outputs beyond an academic audience and encouraging members of the public to learn more about deaf culture. Participants valued the opportunity to share their work in this way, and seeing their stories made meaningful and relevant to wider audiences.
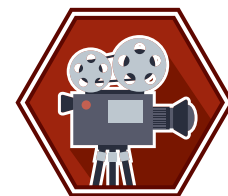
Participatory Film Making

Where else could Participatory Film Making be used?

Researching social isolation with older people

Participatory Film Making can be used to better understand what matters to, or what issues are being faced by, particular communities and individuals. As discussed above, this approach is particularly useful for giving voice to underrepresented groups, for understanding complex or taboo social phenomenon, and for improving understandings of an issue from the perspective of the community facing said challenge. For instance, social isolation is a big issue that faces many older people. In this scenario, a Participatory Film Making exercise might begin with understanding the significance of friendship in the lives of older people, as a way to counter narratives of isolation. The exercise would be developed in a way which enables the people you are working with to think through a set of questions for themselves about how they may enhance their social lives. The approach could also be adopted for young people involved in particular subcultures or sports or for inviting young people to determine the areas they would like to explore; residents in a particular area experiencing environmental change (drought, fire, flood, climate change); eco and alternative communities. While there are often specific social, political, economic or environmental challenges facing these groups you may wish to explore, the questions asked do not need to be predetermined – Participatory Film Making can be used to 'give voice' to issues defined by a community/sub-group.

Top tips

1. Collaborate with people who already have the skills to make this happen, or train yourself on how to make films.

2. Remember that this method is an ongoing process of listening, peer feedback and discussion.

3. Think ethically and adopt process ethics – an ethical approach to Participatory Film Making is not just about the process of making the films, but also thinking with the community about how these films are to be released and distributed. These issues of who owns the films and rights to use the films are ethical considerations that needs to be discussed/determined with the community.

Participatory Film Making

🌐 **Further reading**

- Insight Share

- Steps for the future

- Liparu Lyetu – our life: Participatory ethnographic filmmaking in applied contexts

- Participatory ethnographic filmmaking: Transcultural collaboration in research and filmmaking

To reference: BIrving, A., Swannack, R., Mbazima, N., Barron, A. and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Participatory Film Making' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems. Manchester:* Aspect and The University of Manchester.

To read about more exciting social science methods, the full range of *Methods for Change* 'how to' guides can be found here