



Social Documentary as a Pedagogic Tool: the Experience of the Project Europa 2111

Roberto Costantini

Associazione Culturale casa delle Culture (Italy)
robertocost@libero.it

1. Introduction

The objective of the project Europa 2111 is to investigate how innovative ICT-based contents and pedagogy - such as the ethnographic social video-documentary - facilitate the updating of the educational system and the starting point for new didactic methodology for secondary schools, VET, as well as for universities and for an internal updating of the professional areas of each throughout the whole lifelong learning domains.

It addresses four key research questions:

What difference does employing an innovative ICT-content and pedagogy, such as the social documentary, as opposed to more traditional modes, such as an essay or a presentation or a written examination?

Can the medium of social documentary and the approach of digital ethnography facilitate critically reflective learning?

Is social documentary making a tool for enabling learners to meet the EU competence for lifelong learning?

Is social documentary facilitating the participants' development of critical media literacy?

2. Social Documentary

Writing about his social documentary project with New York teenagers, media educator Steven Goodman describes the ethnographic approach as being informed by anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath who told her students to "imagine they had just been set down as strangers in their own community" [1]

A social documentary produced in the ethnographic mode demands two sets of pedagogic principles: supporting learners in managing a production and supporting learners in working ethnographically.

Managing a production: research and planning, logistics and ethics, allocation of roles, group dynamics, time management, use of resources (including equipment), storyboarding and scripting where appropriate, technical activities – filming, lighting, sound recording, editing, uploading, tagging and online dissemination.

Working ethnographically: avoiding authoritative 'voice', confidence in auto-ethnographic work, reflexive personal communication, working as 'translators' of own language and culture. This demands working with [2] participants' zones of proximal development in order to support critical thinking from where learners are in terms of social and critical capital. A shift of mode from 'schooled' practices is required, "In contrast to their traditional teacher-centred classes, students consistently report that they feel more positive about themselves, their work and their community. A powerful sense of engagement and excitement surrounds them when they are out on the streets talking with their peers, and talking about subjects of immediate importance to them.... It is vital for teachers to engage students effectively by developing their sense of empowerment and possibility. This is most commonly understood as student self-expression, or "voice". [1]

Participating learners will research, plan, produce and share documentary film / video which explores attitudes and reflective identity construction in relation to a contemporary social issue. The process must not lead to a text, which takes an authoritative position, claims objectivity or speaks on behalf of the people it represents.

The critically reflexive learning areas this project seeks to facilitate are:

Media literacy (Cultural awareness and expression, social and civic competence, communication)

Critical reflection (learning to learn)

Collaboration (learning to learn, sense of initiative, communication)

Technical skill (Cultural expression, digital competence, communication, competence in technology)

3. Digital Ethnography

Ethnographic research is concerned with situation – the researcher works from inside the social setting / practice with which the research is concerned. A range of research methods can be used in combination with an emphasis on producing data, which is grounded in the location or activity. Crucially, the specific and often complex nature of the location or activity is given prominence and broad generalisations are to be avoided in the analysis. The meaning of social action, from the perspective of research participants, is prioritized over the researcher's assumptions and claims to objective 'observation' are avoided. Ethnography, then, is:

"...concerned not with presenting a distanced, scientific and objective account of the social world, with an account that recognizes the subject reality of the experiences of those people who constitute and construct the social world" [3]

An ethnographic approach seeks to analyse first-hand experiences in the context of social action. Auto-ethnography involves research participants analysing their own social action. This method will combine ethnography, auto-ethnography and digital ethnography through the use of social documentary making.

Adopting the ethnographic method – immersion in specific locations and cultures in order for research to be situated within contexts as opposed to observed from outside – with the use of new media allows researchers to



do this in virtual ways, across geographical boundaries [4]. For this project, traditional auto-ethnography (documentary making, situated in local communities, reflecting on identities in relation to European citizenship) is combined with digital distribution of the films online, so that a cross-cultural community of connected participants is constructed.

In practice this means that teachers, trainers and other practitioners will train learners to produce video documentaries in the ethnographic mode (i.e. without voice over or other framing devices that speak on behalf of learners). Learners will thus use social documentary as a reflective tool – as opposed to a ‘media product’ that necessarily adopts existing institutional conventions – in order to directly reflect and comment upon their perceptions of their identities as more or less individual, local, national, European and global. This will include articulation of how they imagine their local area to change in the next one hundred years. This digital ethnography will capture the ‘lived experience’ of citizenship.

3.1. The research approach

EU2111 is an educational research project and as such the focus is on the collection of data and the analysis of data. The forms of data will be the participants’ films and the evaluative accounts of partners. Fundamentally, this is ethnographic research for the simple reason that we view documentary making as a research exercise and, understood in this way, our participants are agents in the research – our research observes theirs. Therefore, the video footage captured by learners should be considered to be their research data and their editing decisions should be understood as their data analysis.

This approach views research itself as TEXTUAL.

“The reflexivity inherent in the notion of ‘text’ demands that attention be paid to the textuality of research, so how the text is written is just as important as what it is about.” [5]

Ethnographic research foregrounds the representational function of research. It is, as such, reflexive.

“Although research is generally thought of as a process of ‘finding out’ about the world, there is also a need to take account of the reflexive dimension in research. Reflexivity is about ‘finding out’ how meanings are discursively constructed within the research process” [5].

This ethnographic approach is maintained by the learners, who are themselves researchers. Research is understood here as textual (as opposed to objectively scientific). As such, the documentary-making process is itself a textual research activity, so the partner practitioners are observing and evaluating the outcomes and learners’ reflections (learning to learn) on the process of working in the ethnographic mode. This ethnographic mode consists of three fundamental principles, which can be adapted to ‘local’ contexts by partners.

The documentary makers have to be immersed in the situation of the communities / groups who they will allow to self-represent in the documentary. Thus there is an auto-ethnographic element.

Authoritative claims to objectivity / speaking on behalf of the documentary participants must be avoided at all times in the process and outcomes. The documentaries produced will be subjective and will portray social groups on their own terms in their ‘real life’ contexts.

The documentary makers will explicitly seek out diversity, variability, creativity and spontaneity in their ‘capturing’ of social interaction in response to the documentary topic. Generalisation will be avoided in favour of ‘thick description’ [6], which draws out patterns (key discourses) in the interactions.

4. Conclusions

The EU2111 project is still in progress. The experimentation phase – in which the students/learners are asked to produce their own video documentary – will be over by the end of June 2012. The differences in terms of country/language, learning environment and in the basic level of media literacy of the participants, will be fundamental in evaluating the consistency of the concept of social video documentary as a pedagogic tool. At the same time, the use of online channels will allow the participants to share and compare the results of their work, and to offer them to the wide world of internet users. This will make for the creation of a network which should work as a constructive way to exchange competences and information, in relation to the project’s activities. On the other hand, the network will set an example of interaction between different European realities. In any case, ICTs - audio/video recording techniques and devices in particular - will play an increasingly important role in developing abilities of representation and self-representation of future European citizens, which are already described as “digital natives”. Media Literacy policies should focus on developing in the citizens a growing awareness of the tools they can use in order to represent themselves and their world, and of the way these tools could help or hinder the comprehension of their own lives and a parallel critical reflection.

References

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