Critical reflections on river of experience & life journey mapping as participatory inquiry tools

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Barry Percy-Smith, barry.percy-smith@uwe.ac.uk
University of the West of England, Bristol

Using visuals in research

"Visual voices" - Increasing use of visuals to elicit view, experiences and perspectives

Visual sociology/ethnography – way of documenting social realities (Harper 1994) and more recently, for 'effectively' engaging users/young people

- Most commonly artistic forms such as:
  - *drawings* (Driskell 2002; Broussine 2008),
  - *photography* (Wang 1999; Brinton Lykes 2001; Percy-Smith 2004)
  - '*montage*' (Percy-Smith et al. 2003)
  - *photovoice* (metaphors) (Wang ; Percy-Smith)
  - *video*

- Produce more richly textured responses conveying complex meanings, experiences and realities (Fielding 2007; Meyer 1991) in ways that are difficult with the spoken and written word.

ON DA STREET

Da GR8 S-CAPE!

EXCLUSIVE

HOUNSLOW launches first Stress-free Zone for young people today.

Hounslow has come up with an answer to all the calls for a haven in which young people can escape stress. In a successful bid to the Lottery Fund the Council & NHS Primary Care Trust have got the money for the first ever StressFree Zone in the world, designed to help young people cope with all the stresses & pressures they face.

INSIDE
Horoscope p4
Healthy Living p5
Do's + Don'ts of Writing Out p11

"It's another first for Hounslow & our young people!"
Councillor Colin Ellar

GO FROM THIS ....

... TO THIS !

ON OFFER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:
• cafés
• yoga
• massage
• facials
• coping skills
• trees
• fountains
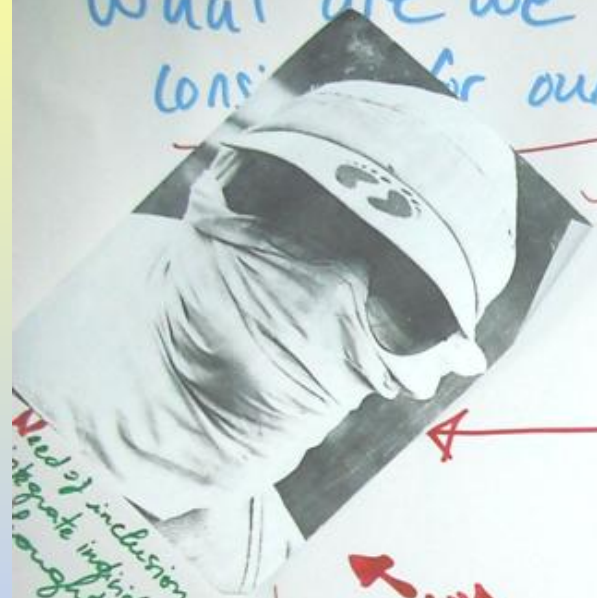• hammocks
• sofas
• healthy eating
• personal trainers

"It makes me feel young again! Wonderful!"
John James, NHS Primary Care Trust

"It's brilliant!"

WIN MONEY & MASSAGES

Special prizes to the person under 21 who chooses the

What are we learning about the issues we need to consider for our projects to make a difference

HOW TO CONNECT ???

VALIDATION

INQUIRY

Adaptability to local conditions (Approaches, time, funding, support)

Need? inclusion integrate individual & community

He has a solution... which

How include him?

How to prioritize???
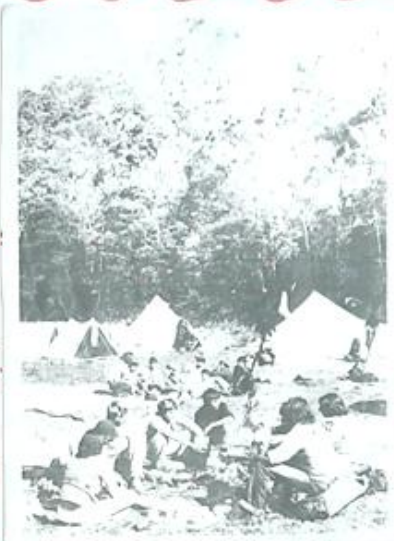
- Consultations with Different groups in the community

Roles of different people in the planning, & implementation

this takes time

Amount of local needs

Time to achieve results.

Time Frame vs Workplans

- Focus - are we on the right track?
- which way forward?
- How to choose best track to lead to the platform.

WB as reliable in a diff environment

but not elegant

WB bureaucracy: social change
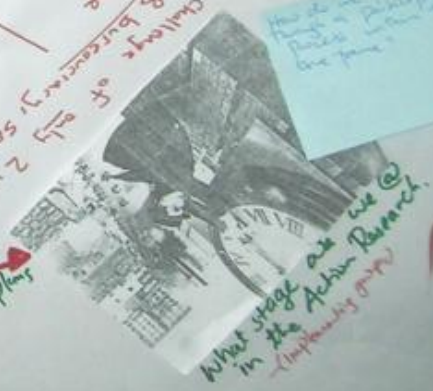
What stage are we @ in the Action Research -Implementing only?

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- Most commonly artistic forms such as:
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Also: - '*montage*' (Percy-Smith et al. 2003)
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Sounds good, so what's the problem?

Possible traps for **interpreting** images – situatedness of researcher imposing own values (Piper and Frankham 2007); reinforcing the power of the privileged and containing marginal voices?! (Fielding 2007)

But in Action Research, Participatory principles mean that (theoretically) all stakeholders are involved in collective process of analysis and sense making

Action research is a participatory process of ***learning for change*** involving inquiry and reflection

Torbert (1987) 3 levels of action inquiry:
- first person (how do I change myself); second person (how do we change together .... Therefore involves dialogue and joint inquiry); third person (how do we change systems)

.... Implications for involvement of 'participants' in dialogue and sense making to overcome the dilemma of 'not knowing' and stipulates an 'ethical reflexivity' on the part of the researcher

But is it really that unproblematic?? – Need for critique.

This paper....

I have used visuals in participatory and action research for over 10 years (drawings, photos as metaphors, montage & art installations)

(My) taken-for-granted belief is that visual approaches are effective tools in articulating deep-seated experiences & values and facilitating action inquiry

- Allow us to step back and 'see differently'

... Need to critically reflect on my own practice/praxis

This paper seeks to critically reflect on and scrutinise the value as well as the limitations of two participatory visual approaches used to connect lifeworlds of young people & families with the systems that seek to support and provide services for them

In the spirit of participatory inquiry I want to invite you to engage with these and offer your own critiques

Eg. 1: Children's Fund evaluation – *Rivers of experience*

- Captures **in-depth views & experiences of children/families**

- An approach that is **accessible** and child/family friendly (easy to engage with)

- Evaluation to support **learning and change in the wider system of children's services** – data needs to travel

- Wanted an approach that would not just communicate family experiences and issues, but which could 'touch' practitioners and **stimulate deeper levels of reflection & professional learning**

Eg. 2: Understanding the experiences of young people who are NEET ..using life journey mapping

Focus on:

- critical moments in their lives,

- experiences of services

- peer & family influences

- feelings and responses

- barriers & negative experiences

- what support they had

- views on what makes a good support worker

- what makes a difference

Life journey mapping – or just another way of recording in-depth reflective discussion?

workshop with professionals to reflect on young people's stories and consider implications for developing their own practice

More than just data collection

- Not just another piece of data extraction but a chance to **tell their story**

  "It was good to get your story out and share your dream with someone"   (18 year old male)

- Young people can feel more **valued and empowered**

  "I feel good because someone is listening to me

- Provides young person an **opportunity to reflect** on their current situation, past experiences and future possibilities

- > valuable for their **own decision making**

  "There should be more people doing what you are doing … going round and talking to people. We never get the chance to talk about it properly, like we have done. It feels so good. Someone to listen and not judge you, like on our side. And for someone to like get it out of us instead of just pushing us aside."

  " XXX has never known what he wanted to do. When he started talking about becoming a fireman it was like a light bulb coming on" (Youth Worker)

Value of these approaches:

- Encourages the **active involvement** of participants – have **control and ownership of data**

- Provides an **accessible and user friendly medium** for children and adults with low levels of literacy skills to participate equally

  "I found this exercise very effective. My literacy skills are not good and I find reading and writing difficult. The pictorial way we looked at my family's experience made it easy for me and my children to take part in. The end result made my story clear and accurate." (Parent)

- **Understanding young people's realities holistically (see whole picture)** without reducing the effectiveness of their stories to sanitized bullet points – capturing **emotional experience** as well as functional reality

- Young people respond from the **context of their lives** rather than to service agenda.

- Personal learning: - provides **opportunity to reflect on and make sense of their situation differently** rather than just respond to questions

- Produces data in a format that can effectively support professionals in a **process of learning to inform development of services.**

- Provides a **powerful medium** for professionals to connect directly with young people's stories rather than through researcher's interpretation in a report – focus for dialogue

Reflections & Dilemmas 1: *Can resurface painful and emotional experiences*

"The mother when telling her story ... found it reproduced all the feelings she'd gone through"
(Practitioner reflection)

"I found it very distressing as a worker to be evoking those feelings and opening up old wounds again." (Worker)

"I found the experience quite emotional; brought back some unhappy memories. ... However I think it was a very good exercise to take part in as a family as it made us realise what we had gone through & how far we had come" (Parent)

But how might these ('negative') experiences be reconciled with the positive outcomes of such involvement? And is this ethical?

"I felt that I did need support when looking at this exercise but felt I got this from my Children's Fund Worker. It helped that she had been with me through many of my experiences which made it possible for me to talk it through with her. Although we touched many sad experiences we also laughed about the good ones" (Parent)

"The experience gave me a chance to look back over the past three years and the support networks I had formed. It helped me to see what had worked and what hadn't. It will help me in the future to get support from relevant agencies." (Parent)

Reflections & Dilemmas 2: *Continued involvement*

Children and parents' right to be involved in analysis and sense making beyond just sharing their story, but what is effective?

Integrity in participatory approaches of involving children & families in workshop, but also can affect the quality of professional dialogue and inquiry … which can affect the impact of this work

-> Decision not to involve children and families directly in workshops – parents did not want to be present, but family voices present in the posters.

> "I wouldn't feel so confident to talk to people face to face and I think I would not be able to express my feeling so well. I wouldn't be able to write down my experiences. I found this exercise very effective and my children could take part." (Parent)

But ….

> "The Children's Fund Worker came to see me after each session and was able to tell how people had responded to my story. I felt that things did happen after the conference and I have since been housed and have received a lot of support from other agencies. I think this was due to the CFW making contact with these agencies." (Parent)

Or is this just all another form of exclusion and control?

Reflections & Dilemmas 3: *From research to service improvement*

*"**I would have liked more time** to work through these case studies. Time to make sense of a complex set of multi-agency issues and dynamics.*

"There is not enough time to consider the implications overall eg. how services are commissioned, how agencies work together, capacity of staff, how Heads of service learn from practice"

"One really positive thing that I have taken away from the two days was having the time to speak with other professionals and listen to their agencies and procedures. It provided me with a much clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities."

"Motivational – it was great to meet so many different agencies working towards improving services for children and families ... A chance to put some real solutions forward instead of just talking ... Pulling together how we could implement change."

"It made me think about what I can do to change that doesn't involve money."

Reflections & Dilemmas 4: *Continuity & response/action*

"The day has raised a lot of issues and thoughts that get forgotten amongst policy. This piece of constructive work needs a positive outcome from those who have the power and funds to make it happen"

But ...

"It was disappointing to see the gaps on the day the decision makers had been invited, that the decision makers had made a decision not to come […] and I think there lies the biggest problem of all, the top management […] have no real concept of the day to day work we do and in terms of people lives […] we as workers are just numbers attached to budgets."

-> How do we enlist the commitment of local decision makers to take seriously the outcomes of processes such as these? – symbolic of a wider problem: public service systems don't learn well!

-> How effective can such approaches to learning for change be in systems where a culture of participation and learning don't exist?

For discussion!

i)	What possibilities do you see for using these approaches in your own contexts?

ii)	What do you feel are the ethical issues here … and thoughts about how these might be addressed?

iii) What do you see as the main dilemmas / points of critique of these approaches?

Dr. Barry Percy-Smith
University of the West of England, Bristol
www.uwe.ac.uk
barry.percy-smith@uwe.ac.uk
Tel: 07505 622233

We can help with:

- participatory research and evaluation

- children's workforce development & training

- involving children and parents in service planning and evaluation ..... Using visual approaches

- using action inquiry to support service improvement

- developing innovative responses to complex social issues ....

… and more !!