

Documentary Filmmaking as a Research Method

Introduction

Documentary films through their multi-sensory nature have found to be more impactful of portraying reality as well as a means for social persuasion (Nichols, 2010). In recent years, documentary films are increasingly being used in academia as well for disseminating knowledge. An evolving belief is that documentaries can be valuable in the field of research to illuminate issues of social justice and existing inequities in public education as well as democratize research (Friend & Caruthers, 2016). The ability of film to capture authentic voices and lived experiences is a powerful tool for democracy in education that can be utilized to bring to light existing inequities.

The role of researcher has also evolved from that of an “outsider” or observer to that of someone who is considered equal to the participants and uses research to empower vulnerable groups (de Lange, Olivier & Wood, 2008). The innate nature of documentaries to capture reality and trigger conversations in society can thus enable researchers to contribute to knowledge generation in non-traditional forms by including authentic voices of participants to co-generate knowledge. Filmmaking has been widely used traditionally by anthropologists and sociologists. In recent times, academic scholars are considering the use of visual arts-based research as a means to move away from the traditional paradigm of the emphasis on the researcher’s interpretation or meaning-making to that of the viewer’s interpretation and the impact of the sensory experience of the images on the viewer. Researchers can use visual images in the form of documentary filmmaking to interpret or represent visual research work (Petrarcha & Hughes, 2014).

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There are many similarities between traditional qualitative research processes and documentary filmmaking. Both processes begin with a question or questions that seek to focus and understand a given area. The processes involve designing the research project and share similar techniques for data collection and data analysis. Both approaches use individuals' perspectives to tell a story. Documentary filmmaking that are products of research incorporate the same steps as traditional qualitative methods namely: site selection, participant selection and informed consent, inquiry, meaning-making and sharing results (Friend & Caruthers, 2016). Ethical considerations and frequent reflection by the researchers are an integral part of documentary filmmaking as well, ensuring integrity of the film as well as the participants. Researchers who use documentary film as a medium to achieve research purposes have to take in some additional considerations. Data collection involves not just conducting the interviews or focus groups, it also requires paying attention to setting up shots, lighting and interview techniques. It involves capturing the environment to add context. Decisions on framing of the shots plays a huge role in the data collection phase since it influences the message conveyed to the audience. Variations in camera angles are very useful in capturing non-verbal expressions and emotions that add to the richness of data and help convey the context as well as real life conditions of the participants. Recruiting participants for the research can also add some complexity to the process since filming using camera can be seen as obtrusive and make participants uncomfortable. Obtaining consent just before filming even though participants might have consented earlier is important to ensure they are comfortable being filmed. It is also

important to ensure that the participants are comfortable in front of the camera. This may require the researcher to have dry runs with the camera and microphone so that participants feel comfortable and help reduce anxiety if any about the filming.

Once the data collection phase is complete, the video clips are analyzed through the editing process using video editing software such as Adobe Premiere Pro or Apple Final Cut. Documentary making generates large volumes of rich verbal and visual data. An added advantage of video data is that it provides researchers with an opportunity to view the visuals multiple times, verify and clarify findings further. The analysis of the visual data is driven by research questions and the theoretical framework. Repeated viewing of the data and researcher reflection form a big part of the video analysis phase until meaning reveals itself. Editing of the video footage is a process that has to happen simultaneously with data analysis. The decisions about which video footage will be included or excluded in the final film is informed by the researcher's aesthetic sensibilities as well as the need to tell an authentic story (Petrarch & Hughes, 2014). The video clips tend to be more intrusive and ethical decisions on which video clips to include require additional scrutiny by the researcher. The themes that emerge from the analysis drive the selection of clips. Additional editing decisions such as including narration, background music, static images, text and B-roll footage are also made during the data analysis phase. These additional elements provide more depth to the story being told. A major consideration while editing the film is the time limit for the film. A standard documentary is usually 56 minutes long for an hour of television and hence focusing on the research purpose and structuring the documentary film to make the research findings more accessible to the general public is a very important consideration in the video editing process. The entire video editing

process involves continuous self-checks and reflection to ensure integrity of data. Another important decision that needs to be made in an arts based research such as documentary filmmaking is the presence of researchers in the film. The researcher can choose to appear in the film to offer a richer and more personal look into the research and to share their own reflections.

Challenges

Most researchers are not documentary filmmakers and may lack experience in visual arts and in using the video camera. Learning to use the camera and microphone, techniques to frame shots and filming in real time can prove to be very challenging. Data analysis/video editing phase can be very time consuming and challenging as well. Since the video captures moving real time images and shares with the viewers more evidence than static images or text, researchers have to be reflexive and make ethical decisions about video clips that are included or excluded from the film.

Conclusions

Documentaries offer researchers a medium to bring out different voices and reach out to a larger and wider audience thus democratizing research. Films offer a venue for unheard voices to be heard and illuminate social justice issues. It also helps researchers engage video participants as creators of knowledge rather than just subjects. Using documentary filming in the research process provides the audience also an opportunity to analyze and interpret the data and delve into meaning-making. Documentary film can be used as an alternate form of scholarly work and knowledge that has a much wider reach beyond the boundaries of academia.

References

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