

Title: Blending Participatory Video and Direct Animation; an experimental approach to Participatory Design

Overview

In this extended abstract, I set out the key dimensions from my practice-based doctoral fieldwork which I aim to present at the NERD2GO conference. This research sought to answer the question: *how can a Participatory Design process engage young people and lead to an understanding of their sense of agency?* In this explorative study, I collaborated with a group of fifteen young people over the course of two years, investigating their ambitions, motivations and expectations for their future (post-compulsory education), and was situated in the young peoples' high school classroom. The group of young people in this study belonged to a Prince's Trust class, which provides an alternative means of gaining an educational qualification with an emphasis on teamwork, leadership, confidence and self-esteem. Within this study, a key methodological focus of mine was experimenting with blending the method of Participatory Video with the filmmaking technique Direct Animation, and transporting both of these into a Participatory Design context. Through a series of experimental Participatory Design workshops, the young people explored and expressed their emotional experiences of education through abstract and conceptual imagery, narrating their films with song lyrics. Here I was able to learn about their localised social and educational practices – observing what I term *agency-in-action* (McAra 2017).

Participatory Video

Taking methodological inspiration from Participatory Video, which is often implemented in Participatory Action Research studies with young people, this method engages participants collaboratively to explore a topic through the co-production of a video that can be used as a device to inform and influence a range of audiences, particularly in the context of social and political justice (Blazek and Hraňová 2012, Shaw 2012, Shaw and Robertson 1997). When collaborating with marginalised and/or disadvantaged groups, this method has been championed by numerous studies, which highlight its ability to liberate and empower participants and imbue a sense of agency (Blazek and Hraňová 2012, Lomax 2011, Milne, Mitchell and De Lange 2012, Shaw 2012, Shaw and Robertson 1997, Yang 2013). Indeed, Participatory Video facilitators Chris Lunch and Nick Lunch describe the method as a 'tool for positive social change... a process that encourages individuals and communities to take control of their destinies' (2006: 4).

Whilst many diverse prescriptions of the method exist (High et al. 2012: 1), an underpinning commonality is the collaborative practice where, to varying degrees, participants govern the video content and making process. In the case of disadvantaged groups, the content can be deployed as advocacy interventions, viewed by external audiences who have the power to instigate change such as policy-makers, charities, and members from the participants' wider community. The tangible output of the video results from a process that can be equally as valuable to participants, providing opportunities to acquire new technical skills, and develop self and group efficacy through working as a team (see for example Lunch and Lunch 2006, Yang 2013). This can be seen to resonate with the transformative processes and values of Participatory Design, where a community can be fostered around the act of collaborative creating.

Direct Animation

Direct Animation is a filmmaking technique whereby illustrations are made directly onto the surface of celluloid film, which is then projected through a reel-to-reel projector at approximately 24 frames per second. For this, materials and tools are used directly on the celluloid, such as marker pens, inks, bleach, nail varnish, dental tools for etching, stamps, and stitching by hand or by machine. This technique affords the creation of highly abstract and metaphorical imagery, where the marker can use shapes, colours, and textures conceptually to tell a story (for example see *Sea Song* by Richard Reeves 1999; *Firehouse* by Bärbel Neubauer 1999; *Free Radicals* by Len Lye 1958). Furthermore, and as commonly utilised by filmmaker Stan Brakhage (1961-2003), everyday objects can also be physically imposed onto the film. An example of Brakhage's work, made famous by this particular style, was the film *Mothlight* (1963). Here the filmmaker sought to convey a moth's visual experience through physically attaching found objects onto clear film. These included collected moth and other insect wings, and pieces of foliage such as flower petals, weeds, leaves and grass. When projected, the fleeting visual depictions transmit a sensory experience embodying the physical quality and metaphorical essence of a moth as envisioned by Brakhage (Camper 2003, McAra 2017). For my study, Direct Animation presented an alternative process of visualisation that encourages conceptual thinking, where new knowledge could be constructed experientially (Barrett 2007, Biggs 2007).

Estelle Barrett (2007) describes this experiential knowledge as 'sense activity' through which one's 'aesthetic experience' (citing Shusterman 2012) can be elucidated. Within this, and drawing on the connection between embodied knowledge and artistic practice as outlined by Dewey (1934), Barratt explains that:

knowledge produced through aesthetic experience is always contextual and situated... derived from an impulse to handle materials and to think and feel through their handling... aesthetic experience plays a vital role in human discovery and the production of new knowledge. (Barratt 2007: 2-3)

The notion of aesthetic experience can be viewed as quintessential to the experience of Direct Animation, as evidenced through Brakhage's work, where meaning is created and experienced through metaphor and symbolism. Here I found drawing on Donald Schön's concept of reflection-in-action (1983), where he describes reflective practice to be a dialogical transaction between the self and the artefact making process, to be a useful concept in unpacking this further. Following Schön, during the making process tacit knowledge can be elicited from the maker, which is imbued into, and then embodied by, the artefact. In this case, the Direct Animation becomes a carrier of the maker's knowledge, which can then be experienced by a viewer. This echoes John Dewey's notion of the 'expressive object' (1934), which can draw out, as described by Michael Biggs, an 'aesthetic response' (2007). As such, in this study I tested and developed the use of Direct Animation as an experimental method within a participatory context to see if it could support and enable the participants to enter into a reflective dialogue about their lives and represent this as 'experiential content' (Biggs 2007: 6) in their films. Practically, Direct Animation requires the maker to work conceptually in the production of a multisensory and expressive artefact, whilst theoretically it has the potential to generate experiential knowledge by encouraging a reflective practice (McAra 2017).

Blending Approaches; key insights for Participatory Design

With the aim of cultivating a safe space and conduit through which the participants could explore and narrate their experiences, emotions and stories, the Direct Animation technique, informed methodologically by Participatory Video and implemented as Participatory Design approach in a series of workshops, encouraged the participants to be explorative and

experimental by working collaboratively in highly creative ways. As the abstract nature of the medium did not demand strict drawing ability, even those who believed that they lacked artistic skill were less apprehensive than they might otherwise have been. The medium enabled the participants to quickly develop the necessary skills and gradually grow in confidence with these. Choosing to base their collaborative films on their emotional experiences of education, towards the end of the workshops the young people had become fluent in a collaboratively constructed design language based on the connotations of colour. This included, for example, associating the colour white with innocence, yellow with happiness, red with anger, pink with love and romance, black with sadness, purple with power and ambition, green with growth, orange with enthusiasm, and blue with wisdom.

The participants appeared to reflectively interacted with and through the process of Direct Animation, working within the connotations of their illustrations as opposed to what had literally been drawn. In the making of these films, the mark marking was a mode of self-expression rather than of representation. The young people visually depicted their emotions, expressed in and through the mark marking, echoing Brakhage's sensory and embodied filmmaking style. As stand-alone artefacts, these films hold little meaning for an outside viewer. However, and returning to Barrett's notion of aesthetic experience (2007), for the maker – in this case the young people – the use of metaphor and symbolism meant that their films have become the output of a process of dialogical interaction between themselves and their designs. Furthermore, the young people self-managed collaboration through the analogy of a production team, where they appointed roles such as Director, Assistant Director, Producers and Music Editors, and became increasingly mobilised to individually contribute to the collective goal of the group (McAra 2017).

Returning to the over-arching research question, it was the creative process underpinning this blended approach, as well as the final outputs themselves, that enabled me to learn about the young people's localised social and educational practices, as well as gain a more comprehensive and meaningful appreciation of the complexity that surrounds their lives. Taking part in this study provided this group of young people with opportunities to collaborate creatively together whilst also maintaining and supporting their own sense of autonomous agency.

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