

Sustained Engagement to Create Resilient Communities: How a Collaborative Design Approach can Broker and Mobilise Practitioner-Participant Interaction

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**Abstract**

When conducting research with young people, studies consistently cite the need to establish trust and rapport with participants. However, what frequently goes unreported is how to evolve these often highly fragile research relationships, and the subtle tensions and negotiations that can occur. In this article, I reflect on my experience of collaborating with a group of young people, identified by their school teachers as vulnerable and at risk of falling through the educational net post compulsory schooling. Through a reflexive approach, this article explores how the use of a participatory filmmaking method enabled and sustained a research relationship between the participants and myself, outlining how trust and rapport gradually emerged. Drawing on relational ethics, I describe the catalysing and democratising role creativity played in gaining insights into group dynamics and the implicit strategies adopted by the young people in the search for social self-empowerment.

**Keywords**

youth, engagement, participatory, filmmaking, agency

**Introduction**

Trust and rapport are consistently cited as crucial elements when conducting research with young, particularly vulnerable groups (Banks et al. 2013; Delgado 2015; Punch 2002). Rapport, enabled through establishing trust, can allow for more meaningful interactions, which can arguably catalyse more insightful and authentic findings (Guillemin & Heggan 2009; Harden et al. 2000; Punch 2002). The desire to establish trust and rapport with participants is of course an ethical prerequisite, stemming from the numerous responsibilities and sensitivities required of the researcher – to respect and protect participants' welfare, rights and dignity (in practical terms through gaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and that the benefits of participation outweigh any possible harm). Guillemin & Heggan (2009, 295) as well as Ellis (2007, 5), are critical of the ways in which guiding ethical values and procedural codes of conduct can become too abstract and reductive to be grasped as practical tools when in the field and at the coalface of participant engagement. These authors call for more nuanced understandings of how the relationship between the researcher and participant is actually developed. In this article, and in response to Guillemin & Heggan's and Ellis's appeal, I will be drawing on lessons learned from my doctoral fieldwork. I reflect on my experience of collaborating with a group of young people, identified by their school teachers as vulnerable and at risk of falling through the educational net post compulsory schooling. Highlighting the catalysing and democratising role creativity played, I will outline how a research community was incrementally built, sharing insights about group dynamics and the strategies for self-empowerment that the young people employed.

As a Participatory Design practitioner, I use my practice as a vehicle for engagement with participants. The focus of my PhD research more specifically surrounds young peoples' social experiences of education and how these can shape their future aspirations in terms of participating in further education, employment or training post compulsory schooling. Through developing an asset based,

inclusive and enabling platform, I am exploring how my design practice can open up a more reflective and representative dialogue, seeking the promotion of empowerment and self-efficacy.

In the context of research, Participatory Design can be methodological aligned with Participatory Action Research (Lewin 1946; McIntyre 2007; Reason & Bradbury 2001), which promotes democratisation and empowerment through a creative pursuit of co-learning (Kensing & Greenbaun 2013; Sanders & Stappers 2008; Simonsen & Robertson 2013). Seeking in this present study to better understand factors that mobilise the participants' sense of agency, my aim was to construct a creative safe space and conduit through which the participants could explore, translate and narrate their experiences and stories.

Akin to Participatory Action Research, much of what took place during my fieldwork was not predetermined so to allow the participants to maintain control. I do believe, however, that my experiences will resonant with other researchers and practitioners, particularly with regards to the challenges of developing meaningful trust and rapport, and the insights gained into the nuanced ways in which these were expressed. Warr (2004, 580) suggests such a researcher–participant relationship is built upon context-dependent and provisional interactions, where the researchers own subjectivities are embedded and embodied, generating 'knowledge that is experiential and situated'. For this reason and so as to cultivate authentic and meaningful engagement, I employed a single case study design (Gerring 2006; Stake 1995; Yin 1994) over a 14-month period, implementing several methods, including: contextual immersion, participatory design workshops, semi-structured interviews and an activity based focus group. This article focuses on findings from the first two phases of the research.

Whilst this study strictly followed an institutional and legislative ethical code of conduct, what became increasingly evident was the need, as advocated by Ellis (2007) and Guillemin & Gillam (2004), for a heightened ethical consciousness that went beyond simply the procedural. This required me to follow my instincts and values, particularly in response to the unpredictability of Participatory Action Research, a process defined as 'situational ethics' (Goodwin et al. 2003; Punch 1994). Conducting a single case study over the course of an extended time period required acknowledging the situatedness of the context. Responding ethically to the situation in this case, particularly in addressing notions of power, entailed a careful consideration of the relationship between the participants, gatekeepers and me. Such a relationship required me consistently to be mindful and critically to examine my presence, conduct and language with both the young people and the older gatekeepers, drawing on the concept of 'relational ethics' (Ellis 2007; Evans et al. 2004). Ellis (2007, 4) describes the need for 'researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others ... [dealing] with the reality and practice of changing relations with our research participates over time'. According to Ellis, relational ethics can be managed through adopting a reflexive approach. Entering into a research relationship to co-construct new knowledge with the participants highlighted a need critically to examine my role and what I brought to this collaborative endeavour. With the young people particularly, I had to strike a balance between retaining a level of professionalism as well as maintain an informal, affable and approachable demeanour. Whilst seeking to develop a convivial and trusting research relationship, which would motivate the young people to take part in the study, I was also aware of the subsequent responsibilities this would entail, particularly when finally departing from the fieldwork setting. This occurred when the young people went on exam leave.

### **Initial interactions**

The setting for the research was the participants' high school classroom. Fieldwork began with an initial four-month period of contextual immersion. Entering the setting as a complete stranger, my priority was

to establish a degree of rapport with the participants with the hope that this could be built upon in securing their trust. I did not have a preconceived plan, however I was aware that from the outset the pupils would require time to 'figure me out' before any authentic rapport would occur. During this time, the classroom teacher and youth worker (the gatekeepers who were always present) encouraged me to join in with the work of the class, and engage the young people in conversations surrounding their activities. The teacher involved me particularly during the more creative activities with which the pupils were tasked. These included assisting with page layouts for their reflective journals and helping source and edit pictures to illustrate their writing. I hoped during this stage that the pupils would disassociate me with the strict hierarchy of power the teacher had established with them (although I knew it would be impossible to eliminate entirely a sense of hierarchy).

However, this initial interaction with the pupils was awkward and strained. I too was finding my feet in this situation, overcoming apprehensions and building up my own confidence in striking up informal conversation with them. Upon reflection, I started to question whether the pupils' generally apathetic response to me was perhaps due to a difficulty in positioning me within the classroom hierarchy. Indeed, they seemed to be initially uncertain as to how they should behave in my presence. In considering the consequences of my physical appearance, there were several possible implications. Firstly, my age. I was 26, not as old as the teacher (who appears to be in her mid-thirties) and youth worker (who appears to be in her mid to late forties), yet obviously not as young as the pupils. Secondly, I dressed casually in the classroom, often wearing styles and brands of clothing and shoes that the pupils most likely recognised (as opposed to the teacher and youth worker who both dressed fairly smartly). I also considered the fact that the majority of the class pupils were male teenagers. Perhaps the fact that I was a young(er) woman possibly could have made initial exchanges between us embarrassing for them, particularly in front of an audience of peers. Taken together, the gender, age and previously established power dynamics within the classroom may have shaped these early encounters and relational interactions.

### **A Turning Point**

Towards the end of this phase, the pupils were presented with the opportunity to take part in an inter-school product design competition. Tasked with designing a solution that would enhance wellbeing for astronauts living on space stations, the pupils and I spent the following five weeks collaboratively designing a device that would receive recorded messages from missed loved ones. Their design concept won the competition, and the pupils attended a large awards ceremony where they received a prestigious prize. It was an extremely exciting day and the pupils were all in high spirits upon winning. I was invited to take part in a class photo taken by the teacher, where the pupils proudly held up their medals and their trophy, which was later displayed in the classroom.

Although the topic of the competition was not directly related to my own research, this shared experience was in fact an incredibly valuable opportunity for me to begin to build up rapport with the pupils. The competition enabled me to take part in a journey with the participants – from discussing the brief and generating ideas, to experimenting with early and later prototyping, co-designing the final artefact with engineers from the host university, to attending the awards ceremony and discovering we had won. Although unforeseen and fortuitous, this journey ended with the young people and I having something in common, a shared point of reference with which to enter the next phase of fieldwork. I ended this phase of the research with a sense of acceptance into the group. Through helping the participants win the competition, my hope was that their own sense of achievement here would carry over into the next phase of engagement.

## **Participatory Filmmaking**

My aim for the second phase of fieldwork was to engage with the pupils more directly in a creative project as collaborative partners so to explore issues of importance to them. In the same vein as Wilson & Milne (2013), who, when conducting research with young people, described the need for methods to be culturally meaningful and relevant to participants, I sought to harness a visual style and form that would be novel and exciting for the pupils, exploring the method of Participatory Video (Lunch & Lunch 2006; Milne et al. 2012; Shaw 2012). Over the course of a four-month period, the pupils and I worked together to produce a series of videography exploring their ambitions, motivations and anticipations for the future. However, whilst being ethically concerned about the implications of using real-world footage in this context, as is the case traditionally with Participatory Video, I wanted to provide the participants with a filmmaking medium that allowed them to go beyond the frame of a camera to engineer any possible vision and expression through drawing. In comparison to the use of technological devices, Literate (2013, 88) argues that 'drawing is comparatively more generative ... because one has to actually draw the world into existence, and not merely select aspects of the external environment to record in a video or a photograph'.

In order to retain the kinetic quality of film, I want to test how participants' drawings could translate into a moving image, or more formally to test the method of Participatory Video as an animation or video collage through the use of Direct Animation. Inspired by the pioneering work of animators Len Lye (1935–80), Norman McLaren (1933–83), Stan Brakeage (1961–2003) and Man Ray's Rayographs (1923–9), Direct Animation is a filmmaking technique whereby illustrations are made directly onto the surface of celluloid film, which is then projected through a 16mm reel-to-reel projector. This technique affords the creation of highly abstract imagery requiring the participants to translate their ideas conceptually through metaphors and connotations, working in shapes, colours and textures.

Through weekly workshops, the participants learned how to use various treatments and created a series of collaboratively produced experimental films. So to encourage autonomous learning, after demonstrating techniques to the pupils at the beginning of each session as a form of masterclass, I intentionally left all the materials out on one desk for participants to then self-select what they wanted to experiment with. At times there was a great deal of movement and energy in the classroom as pupils left the confines of their desks and moved around the room. I structured the workshops on an iterative basis, where each week I would present the participants back with their designs as a completed film, which would be screened. This enabled them to see what types of shapes and textures had the most visual impact, becoming an effective cycle of learning. Over this fieldwork phase, whilst I watched as the participants quickly developed and honed their skills, I also found myself critically reflecting upon the firmly established hierarchy, as highlighted in the following section of my fieldwork diary:

I purposely decided not to influence or restrict the content of these experiments to any particular or guiding theme, so to afford the participants time to get accustomed to the methods and materials without feeling any additional pressure that their creations would be critiqued by myself or in comparison to each other's. I intentionally kept any demonstrations brief as a way of encouraging self-learning through trial and error, only assisting when asked. On reflection, this auto-didactical approach runs contrary to how this class is traditionally taught. During my initial encounters in the class, I have observed the pedagogic style of the teacher. Any turbulent or rebellious behaviour is immediately confronted and dispelled, with, in many cases, little attention afforded to mediating and resolving the conflict. (Excerpt taken from Trails and Experiments, recorded 8 September 2014)

What quickly became apparent was such hierarchical surveillance and policing was not only performed by adult authority figures, but was also enacted by the young people upon themselves and each other. This was particularly visible in the ways in which many responded to the expressive nature of the task. When I engaged participants in conversation about their illustrations, whilst enthusiastic about the artistic nature of this approach, I was often confronted with defensive disclaimers about their lack of artistic ability. Such self-deprecation was a common occurrence amongst all the participants. In the following field note excerpt (all names have been changed to pseudonyms), I describe a moment where I witnessed one of the female participants, Hailey, permit her own creativity through such self-disparagement:

During several interactions, different participants commented enthusiastically on the artistic nature of this approach, whilst proclaiming that they 'do not do art'. Moments of such self-deprecation were iterated often. One participant in particular, Hailey, who had displayed a great deal of resistance prior to the first workshop, and insisted on working alone on this occasion (sitting separately from the rest of the class), compared what she was doing to a nursery activity. Throughout the workshop, however, Hailey appeared eager to experiment with the inks and demonstrate such experiments to me, enthusiastically discussing her findings, and even allowed herself to be reprimanded by the teacher for having her phone out in class to take photographs of her work. However, whilst engaged and excited, she assured me that what I was asking her to do was childish 'finger painting'. (Excerpt taken from Ink on Film: working in the abstract, recorded 15 September 2014)

In such instances, I have found myself unpacking the possible motivations for this self-devaluation. Such downgrading appeared to be instinctively adopted to disguise insecurity and low self-esteem, a self-disparaging strategy that appears to be entrenched within the general culture of the classroom. Paradoxically, describing the activity as infantile in this case actually permitted Hailey to be more fully involved, expressive, and explorative, whilst safeguarding against critique as she attempted to lower my expectations of her skill level. During such moments, I made a conscious effort to remind the participants that their contributions were not being assessed and that the purpose of the activities was for experimentation, exploration and, essentially, were meant to be fun.

Building upon this notion of self-surveillance, I noticed a gradual shift in the type of participation that was taking place. This was particularly evident half way through this phase when the participants agreed to enter an inter-school animation competition. During a group idea generation activity, I began to reflect and reevaluate my own assumptions about the capacities of the participants. Once the participants had chosen to focus their film on the emotional phases of education, we had many, quite sophisticated, conversations surrounding the emotive and symbolic connotations of colour and music. The participants drew up mood boards, music playlists and a timeline to track the different developmental phases of education, from nursery up to high school. From then on the workshops were treated very much as a production process, where the pupils self-elected roles including Director, Assistant Director, Production Manager, Sound Editor and artists. I witnessed several pupils' transition from the role of participant to the role of co-researcher, developing a degree of criticality as they collected, analysed and evaluated their own research findings. The emotions that the participants chose to express through colour included loneliness, hatred, determination, joy and fascination. They also assigned colours symbolically to represent childhood, innocence, growth and safety. I was struck by the degree to which the participants were identifying with colour as a metaphor and a degree of comfort in working within this abstract and conceptual domain (see Figure 1).



*Figure. 1 Examples of the participants' illustrated 16mm film*

As well as reflecting on how the participants were developing as co-researchers, I also became conscious of how my own role and identity as a researcher was fluctuating, particularly when facilitating collaboration with such a diverse group of individuals. I found I needed to be chameleon-like, consistently adapting my demeanour and conduct in line with individual participants on a very bespoke and personalised basis. As my confidence in managing this grew, I became increasingly mindful of the individuals who required a little more guidance and encouragement and of those who had the confidence to assertively take the lead. An ability to nurture in both instances was required. At times I had to act as an advocate, and negotiate with the more active participants an invitation for those less confident to join the others at the hub of activity. Accruing this personal knowledge and insight about each participant helped me maintain group cohesion and, returning to Ellis's (2007) notion of 'relational ethics', played a central role in our developing research relationship.

### **Key Insights**

Reflecting on the efficacy of Direct Animation as a medium for engagement, I believed it encouraged the participants to be explorative and experimental, enabling them to express their experiences through metaphor. The abstract nature of the medium does not strictly demand drawing ability. Therefore, even those who believed that they had no artistic skill were less apprehensive than they might otherwise been. The medium enabled them to quickly develop the necessary skills and grow in confidence. In this particular context the use of Direct Animation also aided in ensuring participant anonymity, a central concern that was alluded to by the participants – particularly in their reluctance to be videoed,

photographed or voice recorded. Furthermore, this technique of visualisation enabled the participants to explore their emotions and experiences through a lens completely of their own making, thus positioning them in control of what experience and knowledge to disclose. The process of creating the final collaborative film over a series of workshops, with the goal of entering a second competition, provided a common objective, helping to instill a sense of camaraderie, with the participants treating the process and their roles synonymous to that of a production team. It was reassuring to witness such mobilisation through the use of a production process that appeared to heighten automatic learning as well as the participants' own enchantment with the research.

As the research relationship gradually developed, I was able to distinguish participants' idiosyncrasies and strategies of empowerment, which, in line with Ellis' (2007) concept of 'relational ethics', became vital tools in mediating and rebalancing power and negotiating the pre-existing social dynamics. This level of understanding and awareness of individuals' working style and character, which allowed for more meaningful interaction, only occurred with time and patience, and on the participants' own terms.

At times I found my role oscillated between that of a facilitator, to peacekeeper and diplomat, and to co-researcher working in partnership with the participants. Whilst I felt managing the group dynamics was my responsibility, I relied on the filmmaking process to maintain an egalitarian culture within the classroom, supporting the participants by encouraging them to undertake creative explorations and experiments of their own accord. As was noted, the participants would frequently profess self-depreciating declarations. This suggested to me that the participants were highly critical and insecure of their own creative abilities, perhaps as a means to lower the expectations of onlookers (mine, the teacher's and the youth worker's). Paradoxically, upon devaluing themselves, the participants would proceed to engage, often enthusiastically, with the technique. Whilst becoming aware and receptive of such strategies, I was also able to discern the implicit social rules that governed the group, which are policed on to themselves and on to others, echoing Warr's (2004) notion of experiential and situated knowledge. One such rule, which permeated every phase of the case study, was the ingrained social faux pas of publicly expressing a sense of pride or accomplishment in response to praise. Such apathy could, however, be briefly interrupted upon receiving praise on an individual basis, where participants specifically requested independent roles and responsibilities. Such volunteered separation, whilst at odds with the collaborative ethos I had sought to instill, suggests this consistent desire for autonomy. Seeking recognition and ownership through being solely responsible for one task also chimes with the self-designation of production roles. Outwardly, this enabled the participants to contribute to an overall production process, whilst inwardly still maintaining a sense of individual agency.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the question of how a collaborative design approach can broker, mobilise and sustain practitioner-participant interaction, I suggest that such a relationship is built incrementally through a process of gaining situated and relational knowledge, as suggested by Warr (2004) and Ellis (2007), in order to enhance rapport and to cement trust. In this present study, this not only occurred serendipitously during the early phase of fieldwork, but was also developed more intentionally during the workshops. Here I sought to empower the participants to harness their own capacities and agency through cultivating an autonomous and explorative participatory culture. Often rapport was not overtly apparent but gradually emerged through the participants' involvement with the filmmaking process.

From my experience, and in line with Guillemin & Heggen (2009) and Ellis (2007), I have found that guiding institutional ethics and procedural codes of conduct appear to bypass these crucial and often fragile person-centred dimensions in research. I conclude by suggesting that rapport can be subtle and

unspoken, requiring an innate sensitivity and mindfulness on the part of the researcher through adopting a reflexive approach. In this case, the research relationship between the participants and I was initially forged and channelled through the creative nature of the first competition, and further built upon during the filmmaking workshops. Through the use of Direct Animation in particular – learned, adopted and self-implemented by the participants as a production process – agency was transformed through the creation of a research community, where the participants transformed into co-researchers. Criticality was demonstrated through the promotion of metaphorical thinking and engaged the participants to think about abstract concepts in relation to, and grounded, in their lived experiences. There is a need, I believe, to create interventions that can sustain such moments of mobilisation and transformation, where a rich understanding of young people’s educational social worlds was gleaned.

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