

Through the Viewfinder: Reflecting on Video Ethnography as an Approach to Classroom-Based Research

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The possibilities inherent in the collection and use of video footage point to an important innovation for classroom-based research. With widespread use of and competence with digital technologies, the timing is right to engage in more in-depth discussions about the role of video methodologies in education research. This discussion aims to explore the use of video ethnography as an approach to data collection and analysis. These reflections are based on my experiences using video as part of my approach to classroom-based research.

Introduction

The potential of video as a research tool started to emerge, predominantly in areas such as anthropology and cultural studies, during the 1980s as a result of technological advancements (Pink, 2007). Prior to this time, the use of visual methods in research, such as videoing, were limited by factors such as the cost, complexity and lack of familiarity with the necessary equipment (Shrum, Duque, & Brown, 2005). Rapid developments have signalled vast improvements in the convenience, economy, durability and utility of video equipment, which suggests limitless possibilities for the use of video as a research tool (Pink, 2007). However, video as part of classroom-based research still seems to be evolving in terms of when, how and why it is used (Johnson, Sullivan, & Williams, 2009). This paper aims to elaborate on the potential of video technology as a tool for classroom-based research, and in doing so, will focus on the emergent area of video ethnography and its appropriateness for education research.

Video Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative method used by researchers to study human behaviour and, importantly, to access the meanings that guide this behaviour (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Ethnographers can represent and interpret the experiences of their participants through the use of naturalistic strategies (e.g., participant observation) and fieldwork (Gobo, 2008). Traditionally, ethnographic research has focused on developing written representations of a culture, or aspects of a culture, as the result of extensive fieldwork (van Maanen, 1988). However, ethnographic field strategies are no longer isolated to the work of anthropologists with ethnographers now being described as anyone who enters a natural setting to conduct

field research (Berg, 2001). In recent times, this approach has seen the introduction of digital technology as another way of capturing human interactions (Shrum et al, 2005). In an education context, ethnography provides a way of gathering and interpreting rich data about teaching and learning (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

In accessing the latest technologies, ethnographers, in this case, are able to capture, represent and analyse teachers' practice in different ways. While there is essentially nothing new about the incorporation of visual data into ethnography (e.g., photos, sketches, paintings, film), there has been a tendency for researchers to focus on using words to describe their observations (Pole & Morrison, 2003). However, with the sense of experience that is provided by video, there has been a shift towards video as a new way of practising and reporting field research. It is as a consequence of this shift that the area of video ethnography has emerged (Shrum et al, 2005). In the broadest sense, video ethnography refers to "any video footage that is of ethnographic interest or is used to represent ethnographic knowledge" (Pink, 2007, p. 169). Although, it is important to acknowledge that the reality of a situation or experience does not merely exist as observable facts captured as video footage. More information is required to bring meaning to and make sense of the collected images. Therefore, for more objective understandings to be developed, there needs to be conversation and negotiation between participant and researcher.

Video ethnography has the capacity to capture the complexities of a classroom and enable detailed examination of teaching and learning to occur from multiple perspectives (Hollingsworth, 2005). This use of video footage can stimulate discussion between teachers, students and researchers after a lesson, and consequently generate deeper understandings of teaching practice. This suggests that video ethnography creates a new dimension for describing and interpreting teaching and learning. While there are a number of positive dimensions related to this innovation, there are implications for education researchers. In adopting this approach, researchers are required to develop new technological and cognitive skills for dealing with the planning, capture and analysis of video. Researchers will also need to negotiate more complex research protocols that include copyright issues and human participant ethics considerations, such as access to schools, the identification of students, and the existence of a permanent record of teacher and student actions.

Collecting Video Data

Video can enable the capture of rich and detailed data. At a basic level, video data can be collected through setting up a camera and recording what occurs. But in moving beyond this level, there are numerous choices that need to be made each time videoing is planned. Three issues are explained here: sampling, authenticity and ethics, each of which can impact on the collection of video data.

Sampling

It is not possible to gather an exhaustive account of any one setting, regardless of the data collection tools used. Therefore, sampling decisions need to be made (Erickson, 1992). The use of video as a tool for data collection requires decisions, such as where cameras will be placed (e.g., hidden or conspicuous) and the choice of frame angle (e.g., wide or close up) (Ratcliff, 2003). Researchers need to be aware that sampling decisions associated with capturing research footage differ to commercial footage. Simplicity is the key to capturing research video with requisites

such as footage that has consistent visual framing over time, consists of a clear picture and has clear sound (Gobo, 2008). It is important to consider that any video record is an incomplete document of what actually happened, even when shot continuously. While it may provide tremendous insight, a video camera is limited in what it can capture, when it is captured and from what perspective (Ratcliff, 2003).

Authenticity

An advantage of video compared to other classroom-based research techniques, such as taking observational notes or recording audio, is that it can capture and present teaching and learning behaviours as they occur. However, concerns have been raised regarding the intrusive nature of video cameras and their potential impact on behaviour, which challenges the potential authenticity of video data (Schuck & Kearney, 2006). Nevertheless, research has identified that while participants find the presence of a video camera intrusive during the first video recording sessions, their awareness of the camera diminishes quickly, even in classroom situations when working with young children (Gobo, 2008). This awareness may be evident in, what has been referred to as, the reactive effects displayed by participants, such as acting for the camera (Ratcliff, 2003). However, as the camera becomes part of the environment, this reactivity tends to become less likely as participants become more accustomed to the presence of video cameras and/or operators.

Ethics

Many of the challenges inherent in collecting video data are connected with ethical considerations. Confidentiality, in particular, is the most salient (Erickson, 1992). A major disincentive for participants, involved in video research, is the fear of potential embarrassment (Schuck & Kearney, 2006). While the faces of participants can be masked through editing, behaviours and actions remained preserved as part of the video footage. However, although video data is inherently non-anonymous, confidentiality can be protected in many ways, such as restricting access to video footage and to personal information such as the names of the participants or the schools in which data were collected (Derry, 2007). In some situations participants can be assured that video capturing them and their actions will be viewed only by individuals who do not personally know them. In using this technology as a data collection tool, researchers need to develop protocols for preventing harm, particularly in the form of embarrassing events or actions being captured on video (Erickson, 1992). This can be addressed through emphasising the participants' right to view and erase any footage they feel uncomfortable about.

Analysis of video data

As part of the research process, analysis is required to make information meaningful. The use of video footage, as an extension of direct observational techniques and the creation of field notes, allows for a more detailed analysis to occur (Gobo, 2008). In particular, the ability to revisit the same event for repeated observation and analysis is a key innovation in video research (Erickson, 1992). Video as a research tool opens up a multitude of possibilities in terms of attending to the layers of complexity that are inherent in the acts of teaching and learning.

Analytic Approach

Microanalysis is a process associated with the interpretation of video footage. Aligned with inductive methods, this approach emphasises that an event or behaviour

can be described, measured or tracked in detail through repeated examination of video sequences (Ratcliff, 2003). Inductive approaches to video analysis are most evident when a minimally-edited body of video footage has been collected and is being investigated with broad questions in mind rather than a identified orienting theory being used as an overarching frame. In this case, the researcher generally begins by viewing the body of work (or as much of it as possible) in its entirety, then studying it in progressively greater depth for the purpose of identifying major events and themes. Erickson (2006) described what he considered to be a whole-to-part inductive procedure as generally involving repeated viewings in which multiple viewers reach consensus on the major events and themes evident in the video footage. An approach to data analysis as described by Erickson (1992) in his earlier work around video was a five-step process for making sense of video-derived data known as ethnographic microanalysis. This layered approach to analysis not only examines the detail in, what Erickson (1992) referred to as, strips of activity, but also provides a more holistic perspective to the analysis by positioning what is occurring or emerging within the broader context. Ethnographic microanalysis has the capacity for a completeness of analysis that is enabled through the ability to view video footage multiple times for different purposes (Ratcliff, 2003).

Interpretation

A basic goal in analysis of ethnographic studies is to create vivid reconstructions of the settings studied (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). However, the ways in which researchers describe what they observe may be quite different from the meanings that participants use to construct their own experiences. As an analytical tool, video can assist the researcher, but the process of video analysis is a complex task. Video can present as a passive medium (Jonassen, Howland, Moore & Marra, 2003). To promote effective engagement with video, strategies that will enable discussion need to be considered. It has been raised within the literature that anchoring discussion to specific aspects of video footage can encourage more directed and focused discussion, which enables clear connections to be made between learner contributions and particular components of the digital artefact (van der Pol, Admiraal & Simons, 2010). Developing an understanding of what is occurring within a setting should be a co-operative effort between the researcher and the participant (Ratcliff, 2003). By viewing video footage together, the researcher can discover what meanings participants attribute to different activities and contexts, and how they interpret what is portrayed (Pink, 2007).

Conclusion

Video technology adds a new dimension to the ways in which teaching and learning can be viewed, described and interpreted. The literature emphasises that video footage enables data collection and analysis to be an ongoing and iterative process. However, there are implications for education researchers in choosing to look through the viewfinder as part of their classroom-based research. This paper highlights the potential use of video ethnography and ethnographic microanalysis for documenting and making sense of what is taking place in classrooms. While these approaches are not common methodological practices for the field of education, this study provides useful insights into how these practices could be used and incorporated into classroom-based research.

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