

## **A critique of the “Hidden” community documentary project undertaken with young carers in Andover, Basingstoke and Winchester.**

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This critique discusses the experiential learning I have gained as a result of taking part in a community documentary project with young carers in Hampshire as part of Smashers Productions. I will discuss all the major strands of the project, including a more in-depth analysis of three aspects; the dynamics and effectiveness of our group, the decisions we made about the stylistic representation of our work and the targeting of our audience.

The context in which I write is of partly a feeling of satisfaction with the achievement, to a greater extent, of the project objectives and a well-received final “product”, and partly a feeling of frustration as I think of the things we could have done more of or better at. This is, I would argue, a useful state of mind in which to critique the project.

In a sense the subject of our film chose itself. Our community drama project with young carers had identified a clear need for a film that would explore their experiences in school so that it could be shown to people in school who were in a position to make change. The three ingredients, community, issue and audience had already all been identified. The inherent dangers this posed, of an easy option and content fatigue, meant that when we were forming groups around subjects I resolved to remain open to other people’s proposals. At the same time I felt a sense of unfinished business with, and commitment to, young carers. As it happened, when everyone pitched their ideas I was not inspired by any of the alternatives and made a conscious choice to stay with the community I knew.

Sophie and Kayli also decided to work on the project, apparently having gone through the same thought process as me. Steve later asked to rejoin us; Sophie had misgivings which would later haunt us, but we accepted and so we were reformed as the same group that had worked successfully in the previous project. With hindsight this represented a potential problem which, because we did not consider it early on, caused a number of issues that hindered effective group working. We made a subconscious assumption that, because we had worked together very effectively for the previous project, we would continue to do so without needing to focus time and energy on ensuring we did so again.

Marvin Shaw, a former professor of psychology at the University of Florida, writes on the subject of maintaining group dynamics as the task changes:

“It is obvious that the effective group member must be responsive to the demands of the task faced by the group. Effective behaviours with respect to one task may be completely ineffective with a task having different characteristics”

In other words as the task changes, so the nature of the group dynamics can shift and unless this is addressed tensions can be caused. Shaw goes on:

“Most significant, perhaps, is the fact that goals held up for the group may be heterogeneous; not every group member perceives the goal of the group in the same way. When this is the case the group is likely to be ineffective in achieving its goals.”

The problems we later suffered stemmed from complacency over communication and failure to allocate time to self and peer appraisal throughout the project. By the time problems appeared we were already deep into the project and committed to a challenging schedule. Even then we did not take a step back, think and talk about some of our ineffective and corrosive behaviours. It was not until the project was finished that we addressed the issues. At the root of it, I would argue, was Steve’s chronic content fatigue and some personal tension between him and Kayli. On the former it always felt that we were dragging a reluctant Steve along with us and this caused friction. Regarding the latter, our schedule and role allocation meant Steve and Kayli were spending a lot of time together, exacerbating the problems.

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On reflection I would argue that everyone concerned, Steve, the group and the community, would have benefited from Steve choosing a different project and someone else joining our group. Steve would have relished fresh content, our project would have benefited from a new perspective, and we would probably not have disregarded the need to continually focus on group dynamics. The pivotal moment to make this suggestion was whilst the groups were forming; we missed it because, in my opinion, each of us was individually distracted by “chose a project” process and our own needs, rather than thinking about the likely needs of the project.

With regards the medium, we decided early on to use drama both to storyboard our film and also to generate footage for the end product. We made this decision because in the earlier module the young carers had responded very creatively to drama stimuli and also because it enabled us to explore issues in more detail. At the same time we recognised that our target audience, educational professionals, would require and expect a more traditional approach to documentary representation. Finally we anticipated that our film would require a number of first person testimonials, particularly from the community. Our mixed genre film concept was born.

We took our concept, together with the research we had already carried out, and planned further research on the education system so that we might understand our audience better. We did not focus enough on the way schools are organised and I will discuss this later as part of targeting our audience. The rest of our research was made up of talking to our community, potential interview subjects and representatives from the audience.

What we didn't do thoroughly enough, I would argue, is research documentary theory and different approaches to representation. My own research had lead me to William Stott, whose book *Documentary Expression in Thirties America* had inspired Paula Rabinowitz among others to get into documentaries. Stott wrote:

“Documentary is the presentation or representation of actual fact in a way that makes it credible and vivid to people at the time”.

This simple phrase became the yardstick for our work and shaped much of our thinking in terms of form and stylistics. We took “vivid” to mean emotionally compelling, i.e. young carers and drama. We took “credible” to mean intellectually engaging, i.e. professionals and testimonials.

However this was broadly as far as our theoretical research went. We had been influenced by the films we had seen ourselves but did not back this up with reading into the way film makers made choices about their films and the various styles open to us. For example books such as *Writing, Directing and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*, by Alan Rosenthal, offer practical insights into how to shape a film, based on analyses of his own experience and the work of other practitioners.

The counter argument to this would be that we did not want to be formulaic or particularly to copy someone else's work. As Rosenthal himself writes:

“Many film makers seem to think there is a standard pattern for making documentaries. That's nonsense. What should dominate your thinking about style (and many other things) is the knowledge that there is no prescribed, hallowed way of making documentaries.”

Part of our justification at the time was that we wanted our community to take the greater role in determining both the content and form of the documentary. However, we did not spend any time as a group researching the choices available to our community in terms of representation. Consequently the stylistics of the film became very much subservient to the content. I could argue that it might have been the right choice to have the content determined by the community and the form follow thereafter; the fact remains we did not make that choice, it just happened. We did brainstorm a list of stylistic “shoulds” and “should nots” for example, any narration should be done by a young carer and music should be kept to a minimum. However, these decisions were made purely on the basis of personal opinions and not backed up by any theoretical research.

We produced a challenging production schedule and at the same time allocated roles. The roles helped us to plan effectively; it was only when we started to implement the plan that strains started to show on group dynamics, as discussed earlier. Part of the problem was that we wanted to capture a large amount of diverse footage, in terms of drama workshops, community testimonials, establishing shots, reconstruction and interviews. Our footage to film ratio crept up, it reached about 50:1, making the recommendations of our lecturers of around 6:1 seem incredible. I don't think our extensive shooting was a result of lack of planning – we were keen to stretch ourselves – but it did act as a catalyst for a lot of tension within the group.

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When it came to editing, all the ingredients were there for maximum creativity and also potentially massive conflict. We had acres of footage, we had decided not to allocate the role of editor (preferring to create by consensus), we had ideas about representation but no fixed story board and we had enough time, albeit with deadlines looming ominously. Our already strained group dynamics were tested out.

As a group we had previously prided ourselves on our ability to have powerful creative debates and disagreements without them affecting members on a personal level. However, the problems with group dynamics meant our creative “discussions” became personal attacks. We certainly suffered for our art. We had created a melting pot of pain and misery, and through it we sought to represent our community and the issues they raised vividly and credibly. Looking back, I felt our approach to editing was effective in terms of debating hard about issues of representation and testing out ideas. It certainly added to the quality of the final film as I do not think anyone of us individually could have matched the narrative structure and flow of the film. I would argue that it was the frayed state of our group dynamics, rather than the editing process, that caused the pain.

Having finally produced a film we were happy with, our next milestone was three in-context screenings. Early in the project we had identified our audience as “professionals” in the education system and taken steps to invite them along. We targeted head-teachers and sent them some direct mail, backed up by e-mail and phone calls. During the project, however, it became apparent that we had not focused enough on who we wanted to see the film.

We had researched the autonomy of schools and concluded that head teachers were the key audience. We had not taken into account (a) how difficult it is to effect change in schools (b) we had picked the busiest people in the system (c) there are a myriad of specialised roles within schools which could have been targeted more effectively. We should have researched the political and hierarchical dynamics of schools more thoroughly during the early part of the project.

On the first point (a) above Tony Klsoka, writing an essay entitled *Institutional Change – a Whole School Approach* in a book on approaches to special needs education edited by Arlene Ramasut, analyses the problems in effecting change in secondary schools:

“The reason is that these schools have a structure built into their organisational framework which is strong, traditional and ultimately defensive against any innovation which threatens to expose attitudes which are discriminatory, self-satisfied and narrow.”

In other words, schools are unlikely to respond positively to accusations, albeit dressed up in documentary language, of discrimination, through ignorance, of a sub-section of the school community.

Part of the problem with targeting the audience is the complex nature of the education system, both in terms of professional roles in school, educational welfare officers, link teachers, PHSE subject leaders, welfare officers etc, and the parts played by influences outside of school, for example governors, charity schools workers, council officers.

The outcome of this did not affect the form of our film as all audience members came under the heading “professionals working in the education system”. However it did have two specific impacts in terms of the screenings. Firstly because we were not focused enough on one section of the audience (apart from head teachers) we did not take advantage of opportunities to invite more people. For example we could have used the council educational welfare co-ordinator to invite the all the EWOs for the county.

The second problem with the broad nature of the audience, and most of our show backs has a very mixed representation of professionals, surfaced itself during the discussion that followed our screenings. We were not able to pin down our audience to specific action plans that they could implement back in their schools. I am sure a group of EWOs, for example, would have been able to generate a much more tangible and achievable action plan as a result of watching the film than an audience made up of teachers, heads, welfare officers and schools workers. This would have enhanced the impact of our project in terms of effecting lasting change.

The screenings themselves were an interesting learning experience. On consecutive days we ran three in separate locations, in an effort to attract local schools to attend. The three events were actually symbolic of the relationships we had built with the local communities. In Winchester the screening was very formal and there was a level of interference from the gatekeeper. In Basingstoke there was a very small audience but a useful discussion. Finally Andover was a well attended, relaxed event with a useful discussion. I would argue that Andover was the most successful event for two connected reasons; firstly it is the place where we have forged the deepest relationship with the community and secondly the young carers themselves got involved in inviting the teachers from their own schools.

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At each screening we received positive feedback about the film and, more importantly, initiated a discussion that would lead to action. Being critical, I feel we could have gone further with these discussions and solicited more specific commitment from the audience. Our failure to do so was, in my opinion, partly the mixed audience (as discussed earlier) and partly a lack of skills in facilitating a discussion. The latter reason is a particularly bitter pill for me to swallow as I have a lot of experience of group facilitation, albeit in a more traditional business environment. This is an area I will need to explore in my final year.

In summary, I have learnt a great deal from the experience of community documentary making. The lesson about always needing to work on group dynamics was the most painful and the need to get the audience and screenings right the most important.

In considering the three main ingredients of a community documentary project, community, film and audience, it is in the area of the audience that I would focus most on doing things differently. I would have researched the audience both more probingly and more informally, in other words to find out how things really happen in school. I would have taken the political and hierarchical structure of the education system and focused on a specific sub-section of our audience as key people to make change happen by watching our film. I would have involved the young carers more in the process and finally I would have practised facilitating a discussion more so that a specific action plan was generated which each member of the audience would take ownership for.

The second major factor I would do differently is to focus on the group before getting started on the project. I believe that some discussion and debate at the “group forming stage” would have at the very minimum ensured we did not disregard group dynamics and perhaps. More significantly may have led to Steve choosing another subject and our group persuading someone else to join us. However, there is no guarantee that our project would have been any more successful with a change of personnel; in fact there is a reasonable argument to suggest that our work was enhanced as a result of the trauma we went through.

Finally, as I look back at the project, the distance between our desire for the project and the outcome does not seem too large – but there is a gap. Our film is better than we hoped and our community have been strengthened. The gap comes in thinking what might have been – and to be fair what might still be in the future – in terms of sustainable change. I think we hoped that change within the education system would be more straightforward than it actually is and we have not gone as far as we would have liked. However, and to finish on a positive note, there are signs that our work has taken hold and will achieve a change in the way at least some schools support their young carers.

## Group Members

### Nick Mabey

For most of the time I was the member of the group who did not lose focus when personal issues in the group distracted the others. I was able to cut through the emotional stuff and get to the issues at hand. I also brought a certain gravitas to our relationships with the gatekeepers and education professionals. And finally I provided some leadership for the others, both in terms of driving the project forward and also helping individuals deal with specific issues.

I did not stretch myself in the research phase of the project, both in terms of documentary theory and our audience. I was too happy with “good enough” on occasions rather than pushing on for what I wanted. The vision I had for the plays filmed did not materialise, I did not follow through on my idea. I need to develop my skills in terms of facilitating the discussions.

### Sophie Hartgill

Sophie provided much of the drive for the group, by getting us to think big and pushing always to do more. Sophie was effective in that she made a lot of things happen. Sophie brought professionalism to the group; she did not let the rest of us get away with cutting any corners or sloppy work. Sophie brought leadership to the group, in terms of her own personal determination to succeed and her commitment to the community.

Sophie could be distracted by her own emotions; in other words if things were difficult personally she would lose focus (although this improved during the course of the project. For someone with maturity and leadership, Sophie did not interact enough with the gatekeepers and potential audience members – she seems to defer to people “in authority”. Sophie occasionally needed to think before acting.

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## **Kayli Steggall**

Kayli totally immersed herself in the project and was always pushing herself forward, this was infections, and she also had a knack for getting things done through sheer perseverance.

Kayli formed excellent relationships with the community, and sustained and grew these throughout the project. Kayli brought lightness and humanity to the project, preventing the group from becoming too anal.

Kayli was easily distracted from the task at hand, whether it be by how she was feeling, some random other thought or her mobile phone. Kayli struggled to deal with the issue she has with Steve, and did not appear to have strategies for dealing with conflict. Kayli was very unpredictable in terms of what she was thinking or saying; it was difficult to stay focused and on track sometimes.

## **Steve Bull**

Steve provided great vision for the group in terms of the film. He was also the fastest and most technically accomplished editor. Steve added a different perspective, professional distance, to our work with the community.

Steve had real problems building relationships with the community, the gatekeepers, the audience and maintaining relationships with the group. He seemed, for the most part, distant and moody. Steve had problems “going the extra mile” with the project and I felt we were always dragging him along. Steve was sometimes sloppy in his professionalism around the work; “good enough” very often wasn’t.

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