



Embedding impact in collaborative filmmaking processes: a case study

Helen Bendon & Vesna Lukic

To cite this article: Helen Bendon & Vesna Lukic (2022) Embedding impact in collaborative filmmaking processes: a case study, *Media Practice and Education*, 23:2, 188-194, DOI: [10.1080/25741136.2022.2056792](https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2022.2056792)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2022.2056792>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 21 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 207



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Embedding impact in collaborative filmmaking processes: a case study

Helen Bendon  and Vesna Lukic 

Department of Media, Middlesex University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Working with two community partners, Barnet Mencap and Why me? (a restorative justice provider), we were invited, with our students from the BA Film programme at Middlesex University, to participate in a knowledge exchange project. The aim of this project was to make the processes of restorative justice more accessible to individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism. We produced and delivered four short educational/campaign films, which are now available online,¹ including on our partners' websites. While the anticipated impact of the films was clearly defined, positioned from the outset of the project and will be monitored over time, we wish to shift our focus in this article away from the outcomes and explore the notion of impact in relation to the process of making these films. We worked collaboratively with our students, challenging hierarchical assumptions both in an educational setting and in the context of a filmmaking crew. Most importantly, the collaboration also entailed working with a group of neurodivergent actors, who contributed, apart from their acting, through improvisation and interventions to the script. In this context, our project provides for an insightful framework for thinking about impact in relation to a more accessible and inclusive filmmaking process.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 March 2022
Accepted 20 March 2022

KEYWORDS

Impact; neurodiversity;
knowledge exchange;
collaborative filmmaking;
restorative justice; process

Introduction

The *Disability Hate Crime and Restorative Justice* film project came about through the Changing the Culture Initiative (CCI) at Middlesex University. CCI is a university-wide programme of projects which tackle discrimination, bullying, harassment, intimidation, violence and any other form of hate, through collaboration with students, staff and community groups. After building a reputation for community engagement as part of CCI, we were invited to partner with *Barnet Mencap* (a support service for people with learning disabilities and autism) and *Why me?* (a restorative justice provider) on a project to create educational campaign films about restorative justice for individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism. The clients have focused on this demographic as the criminal justice system can be prohibitive in its complexity. The restorative justice process is based in guided conversations in safe, supervised environments, as part of the process of recovery and moving forward after being involved in conflict, crime or violence with another person.

CONTACT Helen Bendon  h.bendon@mdx.ac.uk  Department of Media, Middlesex University, London, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

From the outset there was a clear brief and we worked towards an outcome with a well specified agenda and anticipated impact – as the project addressed clearly defined audiences with the specific aim of explaining restorative justice processes. In this context, we felt fortunate to find ourselves in a position where we would be able to monitor the impact of our work over time through the ongoing communication with our project partners. They are hosting our films on their respective websites, and through their regular work with their clients and wider professional networks, will be able to report back to us on the impact of our films. We have delivered the films to our partners and are setting up arrangements to monitor the impact over time, including through regular bi-annual meetings, surveys and interviews. Now the films have been delivered, at this point in the project cycle we have an opportunity to acknowledge/consider the impact of the process of making the films. Specifically, we are interested in exploring what this process meant for our six film students and the neurodivergent talent that worked with us as actors for the films. The five young people who took the lead roles in the films are living with learning disabilities and/or autism and had prior acting experience. Given their backgrounds, they had much to contribute to the project as co-creators, enabling a genuine continuous dialogue across the creative team about the most effective ways of depicting the issues to be highlighted.

In this paper, we wish to map out and explore the notion of impact in the context of the process of making and with regard to collaborative practices that encompass both interrelating teaching and research in new ways (Fung 2017) and collaboration with neurodivergent actors. Thus, we would like to problematise the notion of impact *of* research (implying the impact of the outcomes of a research project), and shift our focus onto the impact *within* research. This feels particularly pertinent in the context of practice-based research where process takes centre stage in the development of creative projects (Nelson 2013). Additionally, in work such as in this project, the processes that contribute to knowledge exchange with third (not for profit) sectors are areas to be attentive to in improving the connectivity of researchers in academia with charities and community groups (Hughes and Kitson 2012).

Knowledge exchange partnerships

Knowledge exchange projects for film students often begin with client-set briefs that allow students meaningful experiences of working for and with external partners, whilst also being guided and supported by faculty staff in the production of film outputs. This particular brief had a more explicitly defined sense of two-way exchange as the filmmaking team (including us as their lecturers) needed to engage in training from the partners to deepen our understanding of restorative justice processes, the nature and impact of disability hate crime and the needs of the target audiences in engaging in restorative justice. The training we received was co-delivered by expert professionals from *Why me?* and *Barnet Mencap* as well as individuals with direct experience of disability hate crime and restorative justice processes. All of the training experiences (and subsequent focus groups with participants with autism and/or learning disabilities) highlighted the broadness of the target audience; the complexity of the issues involved such as articulating what support is on offer; barriers to accessing support as well as the range of scenarios that might lead someone to needing restorative justice support.

The particular complexity in delivering this client-set brief required our approach to involve collaborative, feminist methodologies that openly question researcher/research subject (Cook and Fonow 1986), tutor/student, filmmaker/client, cast/crew binaries in order to engage in participatory praxis. Whilst the project was not conceived as a participatory video project, rather these are commissioned educational films, we borrowed heavily from participatory video processes in the phases of production. Some of the principles of participatory video around accessibility and working with community groups to explore issues was something we experienced as a 'dynamic process of community-led learning, sharing and exchange' (Lunch and Lunch 2006, 10). A collaborative approach with our partners enabled us to access training, to work with research participants in the early research phase and later to recruit local talent to inform and shape the direction of the work whilst building relationships with stakeholders and one another.

The emphasis on processes in participatory video literature (Maginess 2017) is also something that resonated with our experiences whilst producing this work and signalled opportunities for us to explore further. The relationships during the production had an openness and agility that we wish to look at as transformative experiences for everyone involved, and to consider in our future teaching and research practice 'becoming critically reflective of the assumptions supporting the content or process (or both) of problem solving' (Mezirow and Taylor 2011, 22). The knowledge exchange, in the terms in which we operated, works beyond a two-way client/film producer dynamic, and is explicitly expansive to co-create with the key stakeholders in the film – those with learning disabilities and/or autism within 'a feminist praxis of care and solidarity that is decentred, conflicted, and committed to negotiation' (Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, and Bradley 2010, 408).

As the academic leads, we positioned ourselves as co-learners alongside the students, going on a research journey as equals, challenging our own existing practices, interrogating our subjectivities throughout the process in a way to utilise collaboration as a method of creative production. There was a sense of undoing, or perhaps rethinking established aspects of film language. For example, in our early ideas development, we had to question our use of signifiers, visual metaphors and layers of film language that build the complexity of the film image in multisensory ways, but which might cause sensory overwhelm for individuals in the target audience demographic. Together with our students we were 'susceptible to new learning at the edge of our comfort zones', operating at our 'learning edge' (Gravett and Petersen 2011, 107). In this project space with students, clients, research participants and actors, these collaborative methods and approaches were, as Tess Maginess articulates about participatory filmmaking, 'very liberating for teachers, engaging them in a much more deeply reflective kind of practice, sponsoring co-learning and participant-centered learning.' (Maginess 2017, 45). As such, by embedding reflexivity throughout the project, the work shifted from a product-based exchange – making films for clients – to a collaborative mode of making films with individuals in the constituent target audience groups.

Content development

The broad remit of learning disabilities and/or autism, the wide scope of criminal and/or antisocial behaviours, as well as the different ways in which restorative justice processes can work, set up some creative challenges in trying to write specific scenarios that would

connect to the target audience but would not overwhelm with more abstract concepts around restorative justice. Specialist training, focus groups and independent research informed the development of ideas to take us from a generalised notion of restorative justice to specific scenarios to aid conversations with the target audience groups. Rather than a singular approach, we pitched four vignettes to the clients that depicted serious criminality (cuckooing), verbal abuse and aggression, mate crime (involving money) and misunderstandings about non-visible disabilities to serve as campaign themes. The arc in these awareness raising films needed to be clear and concise and a linear approach to filming, to aid understanding of the narrative for each character. The structure of the films was: (1) sometimes bad things happen, (2) when they do, it can really affect you, sometimes for a long time afterwards, and (3) restorative justice processes can help you move on.

For the third (and final) section of the film we embedded a workshop with a restorative justice practitioner into our filming schedule. This is important to single out and expand on, as this session facilitated a combination of sharing experiences and relating back to the characters that the actors performed. Furthermore, not only was it essential for them to gain an understanding of what restorative justice is, but it was also crucial that they express that understanding in their own words, and from the perspective of their own experience. So rather than scripting their lines in advance, we felt that enabling the actors to formulate and express the message in the way they saw it would create a more meaningful communication line between the actors on screen and the audiences. In this sense, our actors became more involved in the project as co-creators of the content (beyond 'only' enacting the script) and importantly, created space for voices, other than our own as neurotypical individuals, to be present and heard.

While we decided, already in the early discussion with our students/crew, that this section of our films would be co-created with actors in this manner, we would also like to acknowledge the fact that even the sections we did develop as script, transformed significantly during the filming and in dialogue with the actors. One of the reasons for this related to the fact that the term 'restorative justice' proved to be very difficult for the actors to enunciate, whilst the meaning of the term proved to be relatively easy to comprehend and relate to. Reflecting on this quite fundamental issue for the production, we collectively held the problem – taking an approach of 'it's difficult, let's try to say it in our own words'. We had to work around the term with improvisations, breaking down the script sections and reading small sections with the actors that they were then able to interpret in their own words or repeat. The schedule meant the time pressures were not on the actors but absorbed into the generous time allocation. Moreover, this production challenge provoked interesting questions around how the language we use impacts on the access to restorative justice processes, which we were able to feed back to the clients.

Throughout, we were very concerned with potential negative impacts that enacting of traumatising topics may have on the actors, and where and how to draw the fine line between the sharing of personal experiences of hate crime (in the workshop session on restorative justice, for example) and the role that was needed to be performed for the camera. Guidance from theatre practitioners (with experience of working with actors with autism and/or learning disabilities) was implemented to demarcate in and out of role states. In many ways, we had a heightened sense of the need for preparedness

for the shoot days – devising easy-read contracts and call sheets, liaising with parents and carers, generous filming schedule, etc., to minimise uncertainty and anxiety for the actors. The impact of overrunning on actors and carers/families was perhaps instrumental in creating a more robust than usual schedule.

Discussion: reflections on impact

Reflecting on the filming process, whilst we had to operate an effective production to ensure the central messages of the films were delivered to brief, a significant portion of the production was non-hierarchical and indeed alternative to the ones we teach within the curriculum. The students led in the principal production roles, rotating directorial control to be the lead developers of each vignette. In this way, and while working within rather specific tasks on any given filming day (like recording sound, or operating the camera), the variety of these tasks along the production meant having to respond openly and flexibly to any given filming job at hand. This is in contrast to working within a single crew role in a film project and meant that students developed an understanding of their overall position in the filmmaking team as one that is arguably more holistic, again situating students on the ‘learning edge’ of their discipline practices to facilitate a different sense of sharing and personal responsibility to the process of making (Gravett and Petersen 2011).

Working alongside our students in new territory as co-learners also engendered conversations that acknowledged ‘the messy reality of practice’ (Shaw 2016, 419). As academic co-leads on the project we held a fluidity of roles on set, being agile to the conditions at time of filming. We observed how operating as two ‘anchors’ with different styles and approaches resulted in some of the actors gravitating towards one or other of us to help both in terms of assistance with performance and supporting their off-screen experience.

As with a great deal of film productions, we experienced a sense of community and collective will to ‘do a good job’, but there was also palpable joy and spontaneous celebration when a good take was achieved. These observations are the beginning of the process of exploring the ‘entrenched hierarchies between those involved in research processes, generally termed researchers and participants, implicate ourselves (in all of our complexities) in our research’ (Rice et al. 2020) to consider alternative ways of collaborating in film production with our students, community partners and actors.

In order to further our understanding of the impact this project had on our students, we asked for feedback on their experience and key learning points that they feel they have gained and think will be useful for their future. One of the students spoke about the crafting of the film language (for example, in terms of not using overly ‘flashy’ images or avoiding montage sequences in the edit) to meet the specific audiences for the project, as a very valuable learning experience that would make them a more sensitive filmmaker going forward. All the students agree that this was a unique learning experience. They all stress how much their understanding of learning disabilities and autism improved, and how unique this opportunity was to work with neurodivergent actors. Some of them now feel well equipped to take this learning forward and continue working with actors with disabilities, as now they have a sense that they would be able to guide them in preparing for a role. One student felt particularly appreciative for

taking part in a project that challenges hierarchical roles within film crew, which now opens up new ideas on ways and modes of working collaboratively in film. In their words:

[the] restorative justice project has really changed my perspective on different ways of learning. I definitely feel like I just opened the door to exploring a variety of ways to go about a project and figuring out creative ways we can implement a message.

The films were always intended to be delivered by us to the community partners as a tool to aid conversations about restorative justice with individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism, their families, carers or agencies working with and on behalf of those who have been affected by disability hate crime and/or antisocial behaviour. Therefore, this case study is not fully situated within a participatory video methods framework, but some of the more recent critical discourses. These texts move beyond the celebratory and the empowering aspects of participatory working (Shaw 2016) and speak to the limitations of co-ownership, ableism in production processes and indeed the power dynamics of funding and supporting such projects. These are aspects of our learning to develop in future partnerships and importantly, to find space to embed the impact of such projects in the curriculum.

The desire to engage with social justice agendas is part of a higher education experience we want for our students (and ourselves) and has proved to offer us a critical space for reflection on what resource and attention is required in order to support the genuinely multi-directional knowledge exchange that this kind of initiative affords.

Note

1. Link to the four films: <https://vimeo.com/652680499>.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all those who created the project alongside us. Our gratitude first goes to the five actors who interpreted and acted out their roles with great dedication: Louisa Bell, Natasha Mangat, Nicholas Athanasiou, Hamid O'Toole and Aeren Fitzpatrick. We extend our thanks to the Fixation Academy, especially Academy Director Laura Davitt and actor Amy Dilworth-Johnson. Reshma Hirani and Carole Dukes from Barnet Mencap provided training and advice on learning disabilities, autism and disability hate crime and Mark Smith from *Why me?* provided training on restorative justice. Our co-creators on the production, from Middlesex University BA Film programme are: Fran Christie, Sara El Sibai, Marcel Ruizendaal, Cliona Shepard, Menhal Salah and Ellie Farnell. We also thank other students who took part in the project: Max Hayes, Eric Chingchi Hu and Jei Dylan Georgiadis. In the Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries we thank Dr Kene Igweonu for financial support, Peter Beverstock for studio support, Lisette Metcalfe for location assistance and Nayomi Roshini, for production management support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The project was funded by Middlesex University's Higher Education Innovation Fund in the Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries.

Notes on contributors

Helen Bendon is Associate Professor in Film and Media. Helen teaches on the BA Film programme, and is also Academic Lead on the *Changing the Culture Initiative (CCI): Shifting attitudes, values and behaviours and creating more inclusive and tolerant communities*. She coordinated the Media Department's involvement in *No Home for Hate*, funded by the HEFCE Catalyst Fund, in 2017/18. Helen's work with CCI embeds EDI into the curricula to increase student engagement, awareness and partnership in ways that are valued and transformative. She has lead knowledge exchange partnership projects with the Violent Crime Prevention Board, Safe4Faith with the Metropolitan Police, and ThriveLdn for World Mental Health Day.

Vesna Lukic is Lecturer in Film Production (Documentary) at Middlesex University in London, and teaches on the BA Film programme. Her work focuses on film as a mode of interdisciplinary research, and more recently she has been involved in a number of projects that explore ways of bringing together (practice) research and teaching. She published her work in the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* (2018), *Journal of Media Practice and Education* (2019) and *Screenworks* (2019) and presented in a number of academic conferences.

ORCID

Helen Bendon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0600-8524>

Vesna Lukic  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2685-0153>

References

- Cahill, C., D. A. Quijada Cerecer, and M. Bradley. 2010. "'Dreaming of...': Reflections on Participatory Action Research as a Feminist Praxis of Critical Hope." *Affilia* 25 (4): 406–416. doi:10.1177/0886109910384576.
- Cook, J., and M. Fonow. 1986. "Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research." *Sociological Inquiry* 56 (1): 2–29.
- Fung, D. 2017. *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*. London: UCL Press.
- Gravett, S., and N. Petersen. 2011. "Promoting Dialogic Teaching Among Higher Education Faculty in South Africa." In *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, edited by J. Mezirow, and E. W. Taylor, 85–100. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Hughes, A., and M. Kitson. 2012. "Pathways to Impact and the Strategic Role of Universities: New Evidence on the Breadth and Depth of University Knowledge Exchange in the UK and the Factors Constraining its Development." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 36 (3): 723–750. Special issue: Universities as Strategic Actors in the Knowledge Economy.
- Lunch, N., and C. Lunch. 2006. *Insights Into Participatory Video: A Handbook for the Field*. Oxford: InsightShare.
- Maginess, T. 2017. "'Crossin' the Bridge: A Participatory Approach to Filmmaking.'" *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2017 (154). doi:10.1002/ace.20229.
- Mezirow, J., and E. W. Taylor, eds. 2011. *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. Accessed January 7, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Nelson, R. 2013. *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rice, C., A. LaMarre, N. Changfoot, and P. Douglas. 2020. "Making Spaces: Multimedia Storytelling as Reflexive, Creative Praxis." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 17 (2): 222–239. doi:10.1080/14780887.2018.1442694.
- Shaw, J. 2016. "Emergent Ethics in Participatory Video." *Area* 48: 419–426. doi:10.1111/area.12167.