



Realities Toolkit #17

Using Participatory Visual Methods

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Introduction

This toolkit aims to share our experiences of using a variety of participatory visual methods in a project designed to challenge stereotypes of older women, called Representing Self – Representing Ageing (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [Res-356-25-0040]. See: www.representing-ageing.com for more details).

What are participatory visual methods?

You might want to consider using visual methods if you want your research participants to *show* you how they perceive the world, rather than just *tell* you in a focus group, interview or survey. In order to make visual methods participatory, you have to be prepared to hand over some control over the image-making to research participants themselves. You will also need to think about ways of sustaining their involvement in as many different aspects of the research project as possible. The term 'participatory' can be criticised for being nebulous, incorporating everything from full-blown action research (where a group of people approach researchers directly with a proposal for research and are involved in every stage of the research process and directly benefit from the outcomes) to a single interview in which a person is expected to 'participate' through dialogue. The looseness of the term is in part responsible for what some have called a 'tick box approach to participation.' At a basic level, a participatory approach should offer an alternative to a prescriptive, 'top down' model of research where research subjects are asked to give very specific forms of data in a prescribed format with clear limits put on their involvement. Our view is that a project can only truly be considered participatory if the values which underpin it are about involving research subjects in as many stages of the research as possible, offering them the opportunity to direct the research as well as influence the

treatment of the data and the outputs. Participation should be built into the design of the project from the start as it will affect how the project is run and has time and budget implications. Tagging it on at the end as an afterthought won't work and is likely to appear tokenistic.

Visual methods can actually aid participation because images are often more accessible to people than dense academic text, and they also have a novelty factor which is likely to keep people stimulated and engaged in the research process for longer. There are a range of visual methods which can be used: photography; painting and drawing; sculpting; filming – any method, in fact, which produces data in material visual form. Not all of these methods will be suitable for every individual or group you choose to work with, so they should be tailored to suit the needs of those involved. If people do not have experience of using the chosen medium, they should be given guidance and support. In the Representing Self – Representing Ageing (RSRA) project, we used three methods in three different workshop series: art therapy; photo therapy; and community arts. I will describe these in turn, highlighting the ways participation was enhanced in each.

The art therapy workshop series involved two hour weekly sessions over 8 weeks where self-selected older women were invited to discuss their views about ageing and respond to those discussions by producing art works (sculptures, drawings and paintings, textiles, collage, photos) which were then subject to further discussion in the group. There was no expectation of artistic ability, only a stated interest in creating new images of old age. In an art elicitation project such as this, facilitation will be necessary to maintain group focus on the research themes and offer rudimentary instruction in the use of the art materials. While themes did arise organically in the group discussions it would be advisable to have some more structured exercises in reserve in case ideas dry up. The therapeutic element to this workshop series encouraged participants to feel personally invested in the process and its outputs.

The photo therapy workshop series involved 5 day long sessions also with a group of self-selected older women. The facilitator employed to run this workshop series had devised this method over a number of years (cf Martin and Spence (1986)), although there are likely to be variations on a theme (cf Craig (2009) for some basic ideas). These sessions were highly structured and precisely timed and discrete activities were set. For example: asking people to bring in an object to introduce themselves to the group; asking them to create photo-diaries as homework; and instructing them to work in pairs to 're-enact' scenes which *might* have occurred in the past, or scenes which *might* occur in the future in front of the camera. Both these therapeutic methods – art therapy and photo therapy - had strong participatory elements in that the women were involved in an intense process of self-reflection over a number of sessions.

Both facilitators were trained therapists. They were employed to use therapeutic approaches to facilitate the women's image-making, rather than to offer therapy to the participants. You would need to hire someone who had the relevant therapeutic training and facilitation skills if you wanted to employ these methods.



Figure 1- Photo Diary Images (© Look at Me project, University of Sheffield)

The women were encouraged to direct the image-making using their own creative skills and imagination with only very broad research themes to guide them. The resultant images were revealing of participants' personal experiences and reflections on a sensitive topic. After the workshops, participants' images were immediately available for discussion and interpretation among the groups and they could, as groups, reflect on the process of having made them. The interpretations offered at this stage fed directly into the analysis conducted by the researchers later.

In the third workshop series, an established community arts organisation was commissioned to use its long-standing local connections to recruit two pre-existing groups of older women. Professional photographers were then recruited to work with these groups. Here, participants were not as interested in making images themselves but were happy to work alongside a professional artist and develop ideas in collaboration with them. Sustaining participants' interest in the research is paramount to securing their long-standing involvement. Enabling participation is not always just about 'handing over control', which many participants would find daunting or requiring too much effort. It is also about listening to expressions of need, interest and competence and tailoring activities to bring out the best in the group. The arts organisation introduced additional layers of involvement in order to give the groups a sense of ownership over the project. Each group helped to write the photographer's brief and were actively involved in deciding what form the workshops would take. Two group representatives also sat on the photographer's interview panel and were thus instrumental in the selection of the professional photographer. At the end of the workshop series, two local exhibitions were held to which all participants were invited and each woman was given a certificate and a framed print of their favourite image.



Figure 2 - Community Exhibition (©Fiona Oliver - www.fionaoliverphotography.co.uk)

Summary

Participation is a nebulous term, but at its core is a commitment to involving research subjects in as many stages of the research as possible and presenting them with the opportunity to direct the research as well as influence the treatment of the data and the outputs. When using visual methods, letting research subjects choose their own visual medium (photography, painting and drawing, sculpting, filming) and allowing their imagination free rein is one way to enhance participation. Other people might flounder without a structure or a stimulus so the views of participants should be solicited at the outset and the image-making sessions tailored accordingly. Participants' interpretation of the images they produce, as well as those produced by/of others in the project, should also be solicited and incorporated into the analysis where possible.

Practical ways of enhancing participation

Whatever type of image-making sessions you are facilitating, you will need to do a considerable amount of advance planning and think about challenges which might arise. Here is a brief checklist:

- Creative thinking does not come naturally to everyone. Do you want to see what visual representations 'ordinary' people can create when given the chance, or do you want to see what artists or people with demonstrable artistic skills can create?
- If you choose to recruit people who have no previous experience of image-making, you will have to spend time at the start making them feel confident about the different media on offer for them to use. This means that you will have to be very familiar with all the technical aspects of the available equipment in order to be able to instruct others!
- Think about involving research subjects in the recruitment of the facilitator/ professional artist.
- Introduce the research questions. Outline the participatory values which the research team subscribes to and open up channels for participants to give feedback as you go along. Take note of any feedback and try and act on it.

- Lay down ground rules about respecting confidentiality in order to create a safe space for the production of any personal and/or revealing images.
- If you are going to hand out cameras and/or video cameras then think about how you are going to store and download the media files afterwards.
- You may or may not have time to give a full course of tuition in the various media on offer. If the quality of the outputs is not paramount, ask participants to focus on coming up with a concept rather than focusing on its perfect execution.
- If people are in need of stimulation you could have a range of prompts in reserve e.g. showing a particularly provocative image and asking them to respond to it, or asking people to work in pairs to work on themes collaboratively.
- Regularly review images in order to prompt interpretation from participants themselves. This could be done at the end of each session, or, if the photos need to be developed, at the beginning of the next.
- Keep a close eye on people who may be struggling to express themselves visually as they may need additional encouragement. Suggest that they try different media. Don't leave them floundering as they may drop out.
- At the end of the workshop/data collection period, make sure participants have clear expectations of 'next steps' – both in terms of what the research team will be doing with the data and how their involvement in the project will continue/ develop.

Sustaining participation

Once you have collected your visual data, you can maintain participants' involvement in various ways. This will depend on what you plan to do with the visual materials e.g. upload them to a website, show them at conferences, display them in a book. In the RSRA project, we mounted a large city centre exhibition where a selection of images from all three workshop series were displayed. Participants were involved in the planning stages via a day long meeting. When proposing to show images of or by research participants in a public venue, particularly in their home city, it is vital that participants are given an opportunity to say how they want their images displayed so that they do not feel they, or their work, are being misrepresented. In our project, for example, some participants expressed concern about the juxtaposition of their image with other images which had a very different meaning. Issues such as these need to be negotiated sensitively. It might be an idea to revisit consent forms at this juncture to make sure people are still happy for their images to be shown.

Although we wanted all voices to be heard, reaching a consensus about the format and 'look' of an exhibition with 41 participants with widely differing views and different levels of experience of mounting an exhibition was exceedingly difficult. It was deemed that a fully participatory exhibition would

have been very difficult to manage and ultimately dominated by those with the strongest views, the most experience, and the most time on their hands. Setting up a steering committee with nominated representatives is one option to consider. In the RSRA project, a curator was employed in order to bring a sense of cohesion to the exhibition as a whole and give it a professional look. We continued to consult with participants in the build up to the exhibition, offering the women the opportunity to write or amend the labels accompanying their images, inviting them to get involved in press related activities and to attend a private viewing with their friends and relatives after the exhibition was installed.

Sustaining participation through the data analysis and dissemination phases of a project creates additional work for the researchers as consultation and capacity building always takes time. At a practical level, additional layers of involvement should be built into budgets and timescales at the outset. If you want participants to speak at conferences about their images, or contribute to publications, then considerable training may be required. You may find, as we did, that while participants are keen to roll up their sleeves and create the images, they are less interested in the management/co-ordination side of disseminating them, as long as they feel that their work is being respected and their opinions heard.

Summary

Post data collection, think about other ways of continuing to involve people and keeping them up-to-date and interested in the research e.g. putting on an exhibition of the images produced; inviting participants to give interviews to journalists; involving participants in academic outputs like conference papers and journal articles.

Potential benefits of using participatory visual methods

Making a research project fully participatory is both time-consuming and costly and creates additional layers of communication and consultation for those managing the project. This should not be done solely as a 'tick box' exercise. However, it is not an 'all or nothing' scenario and research projects using visual methods can be participatory in some areas and seek to retain control over others. As long as you are clear about which areas participants can influence and which they cannot from the outset, then you cannot be accused of raising expectations or failing to deliver on participatory goals. The main point is that unless you perceive that there is value in participation, it is likely to become a point of contention very quickly when you realise the additional administrative layers it presents. Here are some of the potential benefits of using participatory visual methods:

- Visual outputs produced by participants can be analysed for what they reveal about the way people choose to represent themselves to others and how they identify what is significant about their lives. This is a different type of data to that produced when a researcher takes images or video footage of research subjects, where it is the researcher's 'eye' or interpretation of the subject's world which is paramount. It is also different from working with pre-existing images, for example, a family archive, as

these images are not created with the purposes of the research in mind but rather are mined for their significance in relation to those themes after the event.

- Taking a fully participatory approach takes academic research out of the 'ivory tower'. It allows the research process to be influenced by the very people who are providing the data on which research findings will be based. It assumes a more equitable approach to conducting research (although unless you are doing a very radical type of action research, it is unlikely ever to be *fully* equitable).
- Giving participants a sense of ownership over the research process makes them more likely to invest the time and energy required to make the project a success. There is a chance that they will produce more revealing/more heartfelt images as a result which will ultimately benefit the research by increasing the insights gained.
- The more invested participants are in the process, the more likely they are to accrue personal benefits. This may be through an enhanced sense of well-being as a result of being involved, an increased interest in and knowledge of the visual arts, or simply the opportunity it presented to meet new people and have new experiences. The more involved participants are in the different aspects of the research, and the more sustained that involvement is, the increased likelihood of long-term personal benefits for those taking part.
- If participants feel invested in the project over its duration, they may also be more willing to continue their involvement through 'follow-on' activities. For example, in the RSRA project, we secured some of the women's involvement in an additional educational outreach project.

Conclusion

Participation is designed to counteract a 'top down' model of research. Visual methods are a particularly good way of increasing and sustaining participants' involvement in a research project because they are accessible to all and can also be fun. Using participatory visual methods does involve relinquishing some control over the research process and handing it to participants, so your whole team needs to be convinced by the particular model of participation you subscribe to and the added value to be gained from it. Participation cannot be 'tagged on' after the fact because additional costs and time need to be factored in.

You should try and be realistic about which visual medium participants can feasibly get to grips with in the time allowed and with the available technology e.g. don't offer video cameras if you have no way of editing the video footage afterwards. You will need to support people in how to use or apply the various visual techniques so they don't feel daunted. It is important to recognise that people often need to be *enabled* to participate through supportive structures

and effective communication. If participation is enabled and managed effectively, it can have long lasting impacts on the lives of participants as well as improving the quality of the research data.

References

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Feedback welcome! If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at realities@manchester.ac.uk and let us know.



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