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## Learning through participatory video research: Challenges and possibilities for individual growth and grassroots based social action

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**Abstract:** This discussion is based on a participatory video research project carried out on the U.S. health care system with low-income adults in Chicago in 2011. I present the way in which the project was conducted and provoked learning among the participants. While the project offered them an opportunity for performative, communicative, and creative learning, a sense of collectivity and social action was not evident. I raise the question of how to bring about more meaningful social action through individual learning.

van der Veen (2006) observed that adult learning in contemporary Western society is performative, communicative, and creative: Performative learning involves problem solving, often as a form of research, prompted by the complexity of information characterized in the society, while communicative learning is necessary to live effectively in bureaucratic society. As education becomes increasingly instrumental to utilizing environments, van der Veen argued, people often seek the other extreme, individual uniqueness, which leads to creative learning. As he implied, I think that creative learning has great potential for bringing about *reflexivity* from individual learners and helping them learn from their own experiences. Yet, this type of learning or arts-based learning has been explored little in adult education.

I take on a critical approach to performative, communicative, and creative learning and bring them into the realm of participatory video research in order to explore its possibilities for adult education through arts-based community inquiry. Participatory research is generally defined as “systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and of taking action or effecting change” (Mercer et al., 2008, p. 409). Participatory video, under this umbrella, is seen as a process in which project participants create a video about themselves as a way of inquiring into problems in their lives and seeking solutions to the problems (Milne, Mitchell, & de Lange, in press). I envisage participatory video research as a *situation* in which participants (adults) can engage in learning by doing research (performative), develop communication skills (communicative), and acquire video production skills (creative) while investigating individual problems in a broad sociopolitical context with the intent of bringing about grassroots based social action.

The participatory video research project that I introduce here was conducted on the U.S. health care system with six graduates of the Odyssey Project, a Bard College Clemente Course in the Chicago area, which offers free, yearlong college-credited courses in the humanities to low-income adults. Among the participants were four Mexican Americans (one of them dropped later because of a schedule conflict) and two African Americans. There was one male and five females in the group, ranging in age between their 20s and 40s. During a five-week period they attended weekly group meetings. In two groups, they developed research questions and conducted group discussions and interviews with one other and their neighbors while learning basic video production skills. These research endeavors bore the fruit of two five-minute long

documentary videos, titled as *Rx for Health Care* and *Health Care: I Thought I Was Covered. What Happened?* These videos were shown in a community-based screening event followed by discussion (viewable at <https://sites.google.com/site/videotelling/gallery/2011>).

After this project, I asked the participants to write a one-page essay on their experiences with the project. One participant wrote, “I really liked communicating with my group as well as the doctors and nurses to learn more about the health care system,” and went on to comment on learning in the project in comparison with Odyssey Project classes:

We did not get the answers directly from the classroom. We had to go out and find answers from people who had experience with the health care reform. . . . We did not use any books at all. We worked and talked with other people to get the answers.

Another participant wrote in his post-research reflection:

What I liked the most about it was the team work even though my work schedule didn't let me fully participate . . . and of course I liked to find out how much we can do and tell in such a short amount of time in a video.

Another wrote, “I like the opportunity to express my personal experience, expand my knowledge, and be deeply involved in a group who discusses the same topic.” Learning the composition of shots was the most interesting to another participant. The last participant, who participated little in group activities, though exerted much effort alone to edit the final video, did not submit her post-research reflection. At the screening event, she mentioned that she learned about health care through the project although the research topic was not interesting to her initially.

Despite limitations in time and equipment, I think that the project provided each participant with an opportunity to gain insight into the health care system by doing research (performative), acquire discussion and interview skills (communicative), and obtain video production skills (creative). Mediated by video production, I think, the participants engaged in various types of learning. Interestingly, though, the last two participants discussed little about the problems of health care and more about video production itself in their reflections. Clearly, the video component motivated them to participate in the project, and they seemed to enjoy the process and gained much knowledge about it. Their teamwork, however, was not as solid as the other group. I wonder whether this affected those participants' experiences, as their understandings of health care problems and reflections on their experiences were not as evident as the participants of the other group. Does this imply that group activities are vital to individual learning and reflexivity? When participatory video research loses a sense of collectivity among participants, how can it achieve collective inquiry, let alone social action? What are the roles and responsibilities of academic researchers then? Or put it in this way: Am I trying to create tyranny against individuality by emphasizing collectivity and social action? As van der Van (2006) noted, is the performative and communicative learning emphasized to exploit environments and accelerate efficiency replicated in the form of participatory video research?

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