
VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AS TEACHING STRATEGY

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In talking about Visual Anthropology as Teaching Strategy I must make certain things clear at the outset. First, I am referring to the use by undergraduate students of the audiovisual media of video, tape-slide, and radio, as one of the means by which they record field data, and the primary means by which they communicate some of their findings to a nonspecialist audience.

Secondly, they themselves are non-specialist, and a large proportion are mature students. They are taking a Humanities degree, not a degree in anthropology. They are novices, not only in anthropology, but also in the practical use of media, and even if they take visual anthropology courses every year, they will also be taking courses in other disciplines as part of a modular Humanities degree. My aims, therefore, are:

1. To use anthropology as a means by which students can take a critical stance with respect to their own culture.
2. To use practical experience of audio-visual design and production to raise issues about *written* communication, and to encourage decision making processes which are more public than those which accompany writing. Group working has a number of tutorial advantages, being both more public, and providing mutual support among students who very often find the novel demands of fieldwork and audio-visual production very daunting.
3. To achieve an interpenetration of theory and practice, and of medium and message, in ways which permit a high degree of tutorial intervention in the students' learning process at precisely those points where, for the student, the realities of academic decision making are most evident, and tutorial advice most effective.
4. To raise the issues surrounding the popularising of the findings of an academic discipline — in this case, of anthropology *via* broadcast ethnographic films.

Two recent developments in England have been, first, the collaboration between the Royal Anthropological Institute and the National Film and Television School to create two fellowships for the training of graduate anthropologists in film techniques; and, more recently, the establishing at the University of Manchester of the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, which, again, will train postgraduates in film and video production.

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The crucial notion here is "training" rather than "education", as, essentially, the process is one of adding technical skills to the repertoire of people already equipped with knowledge of a discipline and its methodology. This is an excellent and long-overdue development in England, but I should like to talk about a different kind of interface between technical process and a body of knowledge — one where each can provide a constant critique of the other, as part of a learning experience.

For this to happen most effectively, I think it's important, from the student's point of view, to be introduced to the two simultaneously. In this way, instead of learning a received notion of "film language", and then seeing how it may be adapted for anthropological purposes; instead of regarding the book-based academic discipline of anthropology as the prime mover, the student, by being presented with a dialogue *from the outset* between ideas and their possible modes of expression, may, thereby, see the problematic nature of each enterprise, as well as of the relationship between them. And this will be a *starting point*, rather than something to be argued about after struggling to acquire a "firm grounding" in the discipline.

It is in this way that, for the last fifteen years at Bristol Polytechnic, we have been developing ways of using visual anthropology as a teaching strategy with Humanities students, whose programmes and rushes tapes are creating an archive of contemporary culture which we have established with the Bristol City Museum.

In the time available I can do no more than present 3 specific examples of the kind of educational objective our students achieve as a matter of routine. These are illustrated by 3 short clips from their work.

CLIP 1: ON THE BUSES

Clip 1 is from our first level course, on which students are receiving a basic introduction to the medium, and to anthropology. Here we reverse the normal pattern for specialist anthropology students who tend to learn about other cultures first. Our students start by experiencing the problems associated with studying an aspect of their own culture.

As Paul Atkinson has pointed out, a crucial problem is "the effort of will and imagination to... suspend one's own commonsense, culturally given assumptions".¹

This making of everyday life "anthropologically strange"² is far from easy for the student, but neither is it easy for the tutor to demonstrate directly. But here the student's own video-recordings give a common point of reference. Thus one can point out the potential strangeness, the problematic nature, of the way in which passengers cause a bus to stop, the formalities involved in boarding and paying one's fare, and the small-scale social interactions among the passengers, and sometimes including the driver. Occasionally, as here, the reaction of a passenger to the camera takes us directly into debates about "reality", about disturbing the social situation we're studying, about ethics.

Questions central to the methods of social anthropology are not only emphasised by the use of media, but also the media provide the tutor with direct means of addressing the specific case being studied.

CLIP 2: WORKING AT CROMBIES

In an interview³ I recorded with Chris Curling and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies about their work on Granada Television's *Disappearing World* series, we discussed the problem of filming people sitting about doing nothing. The problem being, of course, that "doing nothing" can actually be doing a great deal — but not in a visually obvious way. Clip 2, from a second-level project, is episodic — hence the fades to black — and the central short episode in this clip shows a small workforce, including the student researchers, sitting having a coffee break. Nothing is *obviously* going on, but the students soon recognised the coffee breaks to be one of their most important sources of information.

The coffee breaks provided the students in the early days with their best opportunity for establishing their relationship with those they were studying. The workforce was small, without any immediately obvious hierarchy, but the students quickly realised that joking, for example, gave excellent evidence of the actual underlying hierarchy of the firm. They hadn't found it easy to obtain that information by direct questioning. By leaving the camera running, and including themselves in the shot, they were saying a lot about the researcher's relationship to the situation being studied. Furthermore, their decision contrasted sharply with "normal" documentary procedure, and was taken after much debate about issues to do with both anthropology and programme-making.

CLIP 3: PURDOWN PERCEPTIONS

If the first clip was partly about the problems of making one's own culture anthropologically strange, the third is an instance considerable strangeness having to be rendered comprehensible. This second-level project was undertaken in a local hospital for mentally-handicapped people.

The issue I want to illustrate is that of reflexivity made inescapable by the use of video equipment. The students realised that the impact of themselves and their equipment on the situation had to be included in their account of it, and they decided to ask a colleague to accompany them with a lightweight camcorder, to film them filming.

The students' strategy may not be an especially novel line to take for anyone with experience, but, as a teacher, I found that their consideration of what Hammersley and Atkinson have called "the existential fact... that we are part of the world we study"⁴ was greatly underpinned by their experiencing the necessity to make the decisions integral to the medium of video.

I am obviously not implying that these issues are absent when research does not include audio-visual media, but, from a tutorial

point of view, the students using video are far less likely to neglect them, because they can "see" the issues which confront them.

Finally, I would repeat and emphasise that these are not specialist anthropology students who would be receiving a traditionally broad grounding in the discipline. Neither am I arguing that traditional courses fail to achieve these various learning objectives.

What I AM arguing is that Humanities students anthropology is a means to an end — that end being a reappraisal of their own culture, in the context of a degree programme which is all to do with learning about that culture.

Visual anthropology raises issues in a peculiarly effective way, from both a learning and teaching point of view. For instance, Jonathan Spencer, in a forthcoming paper on Anthropology as a Form of Writing,⁵ raises questions about the form in which evidence and conclusions are presented. For Humanities students on an otherwise book and writing-based degree, these are crucial questions.

The use of audio-visual media inevitably challenges all their cultural assumptions about the primacy of written communication, as fundamentally as anthropology itself challenges the rest of their cultural assumptions. Hammersley and Atkinson,⁶ in their very valuable book *Ethnography: principles in practice*, discuss ways of writing ethnography, but undergraduate writing, being such a "private" activity, is not easy to tutor. Not so when audio-visual production is involved. And every point made in Hammersley and Atkinson's chapter applies equally to audio-visual forms of communication. But with students working in teams, and the teams operating in a workshop context, every major stage of project work is subject to this relatively "public" scrutiny, culminating in assessment, when we include an element of self-assessment. The "publication" of the audio-visual programme before an audience of peers, tutors, museum staff, and importantly, the subjects of the research, provides invaluable feedback, when the communication aspect of the total project is problematised. Problems range from straightforward misunderstanding or lack of comprehension, to the issues implied by the realisation that the subjects of the research will witness the programme (though not the log, diary, and research report). In fact, part of the research bargain is that the programme will not be played outside the hounds of the course without the subjects' approval.

Spencer⁷ has argued for a much more radical inclusion of the subjects of research in the enterprise, and Brody⁸ provides a useful case study of an attempt to do this in the making of a programme. Whether or not anthropologists generally accept the implications of this position, it is an issue which is as much part of the debate as any other. Indeed, my experience is that it suggests itself very early on even (especially?) to naive students. As with all the other issues mentioned in this paper, I would argue that, from a learning point of view, it is better that students consider them as part of the learning process *ab initio*, as being an essential part of what it means to learn anthropology.

Through acquiring audio-visual skills concurrently, many of the central methodological issues of social anthropology become a matter of experience for students in a way which forces them into making

decisions — which are the best evidence of learning. And their unedited recordings provide their tutor with points of reference which we can share, collaborate about, and thereby come to some kind of agreement as to the "reality" which they are seeking to analyse and understand.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Atkinson 1981, p. 100
- ² Inc. cit.
- ³ Thorn 1985
- ⁴ Hammersley and Atkinson 1983 p. 15
- ⁵ Spencer forthcoming
- ⁶ Hammersley and Atkinson op. cit. chapter 9
- ⁷ Spencer 1983
- Brody n. d.

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VIZUALNA ANTROPOLOGIJA KOT UČNA STRATEGIJA

V svojem prispevku avtor analizira izkušnje pri poučevanju avdiovizualnih medijev s pomočjo vizualne antropologije. Njegovi študentje so začetniki tako v antropologiji kot na področju praktične uporabe medijev. Zato je avtorjev cilj uporabiti antropologijo kot sredstvo s pomočjo katerega študentje zavzamejo kritično distanco do svoje lastne kulture.

Vizualna produkcijska praksa povečuje javnost odločanja bolj kot pisana beseda. Skupinsko delo je v oporo študentom, ki sicer s strahom pristopajo k taki novosti, kot je avdiovizualna produkcija. S svojo metodo dosega avtor prepletanje teorije in prakse, medija in sporočila, na način, ki omogoča višjo stopnjo mentorske intervencije v učnem procesu. To se dogaja točno v tistih trenutkih, ki so za študenta odločilni in ko je hkrati mentorsko delovanje najučinkovitejše. Ne nazadnje se z obravnavano metodo povečuje zanimanje za rezultate antropologije kot akademske znanosti, s pomočjo predvajanja etnografskih filmov.