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Visual Research Methods with Children and Youth: Opportunities & Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Visual research methods involve the incorporation of visual material such as photographs, artwork and video into the research process. This approach to research is particularly well suited for use with children and youth as it complements verbal and written data collection methods, which some children and youth may find challenging. This video presentation includes a brief overview of three specific types of visual research methods used in recent library and information science research studies with children and youth. An overview of each visual research method is provided, as well as a discussion of the advantages and challenges associated with each method. The video includes examples of the types of research questions for which the surveyed visual research methods might be best suited, as well as associated ethical issues.

KEYWORDS

information practices, research with children and youth, visual literacy, visual research methods

INTRODUCTION

Researchers working with children and youth across disciplines have articulated the value of incorporating visual research methods in their work. Visual research methods can involve photographs, artwork, videos or other graphical representations generated by the participants or the researcher, or pre-existing visual materials such as well-known paintings or images from the media (Rose, 2016).

Thomson (2008) asserts that “images communicate in different ways than words” (p. 11). Visual research methods can enable participation from children and youth who are not able or comfortable with providing written and/or verbal responses (Kaplan, 2008). The use of visual methods in research with children and youth may also elicit different responses than research methods that depend on verbal or written language (Leitch, 2008; Noyes, 2008; Thomson, 2008) and allow for the “surfacing of... unknown unknowns”

(Noyes, 2008, p. 141). In other words, topics pertinent to research that the adult researchers may not have previously considered may emerge through the use of visual methods.

Researchers who have made use of visual research methods have asserted that children and youth often find these methods to be engaging (Christensen & James, 2008; Leitch, 2008) and enjoyable (Einarsdottir, 2005; Thomson, 2008) and may have the potential to increase children’s participation (Christensen & James, 2008). Some researchers have also noted the potential for these methods to be empowering for the participants due to the active role they take on in the research process (Julien, Given & Opryshko, 2013).

In this video, we discuss both participant-generated visual materials and the use of visual materials as elicitation devices. Participant-generated visual materials such as photography or artwork place primary focus on the children’s perspectives, allowing the researcher to see phenomena from the children’s viewpoint (Einarsdottir, 2005). The use of visual materials as elicitation devices in interview or focus group settings give children a “clear, tangible prompt” to discuss with interviewers (Clark-Ibanez, 2008) and with peers (Julien et al., 2013), enabling the discussion of abstract concepts. In this way, visual research methods can “mediate communication between children and adults” (Leitch, 2008, p. 48).

PROPOSED VIDEO PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

A five-minute video, created using iMovie, features voiceover descriptions of three recent research studies, examples of the visual materials used in each study and other engaging visual elements. Presenters will be on hand to engage in discussion with conference attendees about the use of visual research methods in studies with children and youth. The video is organized as follows:

Introduction (45 seconds)

A brief overview of visual research methods and their use in research with children and youth is provided.

PixStori: A Mobile Photography App (1 minute)

PixStori is a mobile app developed by researchers at the University of Buffalo; it combines user-generated still photography with audio recordings. This app is being used in Sarah Barriage’s dissertation research investigating the ways in

which young children engage with information in their everyday lives. The children are asked to use PixStori to take photographs related to their individual interests and information activities and to then record an audio message explaining what is in the photograph. After creating a PixStori, the image and accompanying audio message are shared with the researcher by uploading to a designated web portal. This method enables the children to remotely and asynchronously share aspects of their everyday lives with the researcher. The children and the researcher then discuss the PixStoris together at a later date, using the PixStoris as elicitation devices. Examples of PixStoris created by the children in this research project are shared in this video presentation, highlighting their potential for use in research in library and information science. Additionally, challenges faced in implementing this research method are discussed.

Video Re-Enactment (1 minute)

In Xiaofeng Li's ongoing doctoral study that examines young people's information practices and collaborations in informal learning environments, including an after-school technology club in a school library makerspace and a public library makerspace, the visual method of video recorded re-enactment (Pink & Mackley, 2014) is included in addition to participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The method of asking young people to re-enact what they normally do while the researcher records it on the video camera offers a new way to capture young people's "in situ encounters with the material, affective, personal and political elements of everyday as lived and experienced" (Pink & Mackley, 2014, p. 146). With this method, the young people in this study are able to show how they usually go around the makerspace, work with the technologies and materials and identify resources with which they routinely interact. Meanwhile, the researcher asks contextual inquiries to elicit why they do certain things, such as questions of what about the selected technologies attract them, why they prefer using certain resources in problem solving and how they feel while they make something. Strengths and weakness of this method are shared in the video presentation.

Visual Literacy Instruction (1 minute)

Irene Lopatovska discusses her recent research that examines methods for developing visual literacy skills in young children. Visual literacy (VL) is usually defined as an ability to interpret and create visual messages and is considered an integral part of overall literacy (Eckhoff, 2010; Edwards & Willis, 2000). In order to advance VL education for young children, Dr. Lopatovska conducted a multi-phase study that a) examined young children's readiness to receive VL instruction and b) tested methods of engaging young children in VL instruction. The study used visual materials to generate individual and group discussions, gauge children's understanding of VL elements and to determine successful strategies for VL instruction. The study engaged participants in hands-on activities that required them to create visual content

based on the discussed concepts. The study found that visual materials, including artworks, book illustrations and photographs, generated interest and creative interpretations and served as an excellent medium for instruction and data collection. Details of the study and lessons learned are shared.

Conclusion (1 minute 15 seconds)

This video presentation concludes with a discussion of the ways in which these three different visual research methods are suited for different types of research questions and the types of ethical considerations that arise when these methods are employed.

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