

Introduction

Vera Media is an video production and training partnership set up in 1985 in Leeds, Yorkshire, in the North of England. It now produces a wide range of commissioned documentary and drama productions, mainly for education, arts, public and voluntary sector organisations.

Vera Media also produces an increasing number of participatory, or community, video documentaries, and it is this participatory video work that will be presented here. We find this an excellent way to involve, develop and empower a wide variety of women's, youth, older people's and generally socially excluded groups, including those from ethnic minorities. In order to achieve this, both the process of producing the video, and the eventual product, have to be of high quality.

The process

Active participation is essential. Group members learn to operate the equipment themselves. A primary objective is the development of their control over their own work.

Individuals involved in such projects learn technical, creative, artistic and other skills, which lead to greatly increased self-confidence. Technical skills involve operating the camera and external microphones, setting up a tripod and perhaps lights. For women especially, who have been traditionally excluded from technology, this can be a very powerful experience. Creative/artistic skills come into play when people compose a picture through the lens, frame it, perhaps dress a set, make and gather props.

Our productions often involve people filming their own communities. This process allows them to learn a great deal about their area, their neighbours and to take an overview of the place which they may not before have had: geographic and sociological skills. Communication skills, both verbal and written, are vital in filming, as is teamwork. Participants have to work together to produce a good video. Through this, the values of planning, reliability, punctuality, organisation and effort are highlighted. Any film making requires people to be imaginative, to take quick decisions when things go wrong and to take the initiative.

To film in certain locations, or to interview people, permission must be asked, and asked appropriately. Most

of our productions involve participants interviewing people they see as being in authority positions—adults, local shopkeepers, community police officers, a housing manager, a lecturer, politicians. Being in front of the camera is an unnerving experience for many people. For young people, and those who feel disempowered, to be the powerful ones behind the camera, asking questions of an adult and a professional who is, at that moment, more nervous than they are, is a reversal of roles that can lead to huge changes.

Of course we don't tell people about all this in advance (except for funders). It would be off-putting, sound difficult and perhaps beyond their reach. People, especially young people, are attracted to video projects because they sound fun. This is how it should be—and if the project's not fun, they'll leave. We find that participants stay.

The product

It is essential that the end product looks good, and has an audience. This is what we find participants want. They are not interested in producing out of focus, overlong, wobbling, inaudible material that no one wants to see. Initial sessions with groups rapidly prove this point. A member of *Vera Media* is with the participants throughout the process, guiding ideas, helping to plan, co-ordinating the action and suggesting framing and shots. The group views the filmed material before editing, deciding roughly what to keep, what to throw out etc. Even if they cannot participate in the edit suite, this means that when they look at the edited version, it is still their video, not something alien.

We always organise a public showing of the video after completion. Sometimes, this is as part of the Leeds Film Festival. The video is shown at a city centre cinema, with all the participants, their families and friends, invited guests and the general public. We send out press releases and get publicity in the local press and media. At other times, we organise a special event, again in the City Centre, perhaps with a Member of Parliament to give certificates to the participants. It is common also to hold a screening locally. Where children are involved, we arrange for screenings in their schools. Participants all receive a copy of their video, and other copies are available for sale.

The screening of the video gives it a wider significance, which often affects the whole community. Leeds is a city of contrasts; the centre and some suburbs are very affluent, while others are among the most disadvantaged and deprived in the UK. For people in these communities to see a positive and constructive view of themselves and their area presented on the big screen in the city centre, and to see an audience impressed with their work, is immensely encouraging.

Vera Media in action

Some recent examples of our projects illustrate some of these issues.

Changing lives

Our funding brief was to choose young people aged 16-18 in an area of Leeds and create a video which looked at how the group saw their lives and their area. We made contact with two groups of Bangladeshi 16-18 year olds, a girls' and a boys' group. The groups were not allowed to work together, and the girls were not able to go outside to film – they had to stay in the women's centre. However, both groups agreed that the film should be edited so that this was not apparent.

When we arrived for the first session with the boys, we (two white women) asked various questions about their lives and attitudes, aiming to bring out what was important to them on which to begin to plan the content of the video. Not surprisingly, the boys asked who we thought we were to ask this. What gave us the right, and why should they tell us? So the equipment stayed in its cases while we talked about ourselves, our upbringing, our own conflicts with the religion we were brought up in, the expectations our parents had of us, how we had conformed and how not. This broke the ice: the boys saw the point of the exercise, gained trust, and by the session end, had begun to plan and structure their ideas. Interestingly, the girls were more trusting from the start: gender bonding?.

The resulting video falls into sections. As the boys could go out and about, with the girls we spent a long time constructing an elaborate set in their centre, so that the imbalance was redressed. Both girls and boys were edited, superimposed on moving backgrounds of the streets, parks, shops and houses of the area, as well as the dressed set, while they comment on the environment, religion, the position of girls and women, their attitudes to jobs and marriage, their ambitions and plans.

The video was first shown at the 1998 Leeds Film Festival. Coaches brought boys and men, and girls and women, separately to the cinema, and the two groups sat separately, with an audience of the general public in the balcony. Since then the video has been widely shown within the education sector, as well as for fundraising for the Bangladeshi centre, and is seen as a success. Some of the participants decided to go to college to study media as a

direct result of being involved in the video – before, they'd been resigned to 'traditional' Bangladeshi jobs in shops or restaurants.

Given the chance

With a similar funding brief, we heard of a group of young tenants of a supported housing project on Leeds' Gipton estate. This estate had been the subject of a television series, which portrayed it as full of criminals. The tenants were desperate to present another side to the picture, to show that although its residents may have problems, they are trying to make something of their lives. We were told that the television series had made people on the estate physically ill. Employers had refused to consider anyone with an address on the estate and generally, people were prejudiced against. Making the video, which included one young tenant's poetry, was empowering and positive for the participants, and the showing at Leeds Odeon Cinema, followed by 60 estate residents jumping to their feet, clapping and cheering, was one of 1999's most moving experiences. Leeds City Council's Director of Housing was in the audience: he wrote a very complimentary letter afterwards. Again, press coverage was excellent. The participants felt their aims were achieved.

Since then, the video has been shown at events including a national conference for local government arts officers, and a training course for middle managers from companies throughout the city. On these occasions, young people from the Project have introduced the video to all those present, and talked about its production and how this has built their confidence and determination to succeed. This has given the participants access to a middle-class and professional world that was previously closed to them. The experience of presenting to such audiences, and receiving positive feedback for the work they have produced, is in itself highly empowering. Some have since gained qualifications, and moved on from supported into regular tenancies. Six months on, the supported housing project founder and manager described the whole video experience to us as 'The best thing we've ever done'.

Hamari Dosti (our friendship)

Dosti is a multi-faith group for Asian women from all over Leeds suffering social isolation and discrimination which may have led to mental health problems. The group asked *Vera Media* to run a video project with them, to illustrate the activities of the group and its benefits to the participants. We worked during regular group meetings over 12 weeks, including an outing to Leeds' Tropical World, to the shops, and a celebration of Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights. The resulting video was shown at the Leeds Film Festival among several other community films. At this event, members of the groups introduce their film and answer questions afterwards. One previously shy and quiet group member sprang to her feet, came to the front and addressed the audience for over 5 minutes about making the video, the group and how confident she now feels having been a part of the film-making.

Since then, the video has been shown at the group's annual general meeting, been used in fund raising, and been shown by the participants to their families. This last is very important as in some cases, the women are not held in great esteem at home, so being seen filming and filmed, talking about their work, has brought them considerably more respect, and importantly, self-respect.

Heydays

Older people don't always show interest in video, but we did work with an open-membership arts club of people with an average age of 75, who meet weekly at a local theatre. Here, they participate in a wide variety of arts activities, taught by qualified tutors and have the chance to gain qualifications. The members wanted to highlight the value of such a club, where older people not only have the chance to meet and engage in interesting and mind-expanding activities, but also where they are treated with respect, their work critically evaluated, and their continued learning and development taken seriously.

This group didn't want to be involved in operating the camera. Unfortunately, pressures of time and a low budget did not allow us time to run preparatory workshops which might have encouraged some into production. However, they had strong views on what should be filmed, what they wanted to say, and how they wanted the video to look. When it was shown around the region, a small group came out each time to present it, and answer questions. They described it as 'our video' and thanked *Vera Media* for helping them make it.

Conclusion

Outcomes from successful video projects, then, involve individuals and whole communities becoming more confident, gaining self-esteem and pride and presenting themselves with confidence and spirit to the outside world. We are also seeing continuity. In 1990, we worked with a multi-cultural girls' group to make a drama-documentary '*I Want To Be an Astronaut*'. This won prizes at a national young people's festival and was shown extensively in Leeds. We are still in contact with most of the ten group members. One is studying media at university, another made a video with our help three years ago about the women's peace camp where she was living and we have just completed a participatory video project with a third, a young black youth worker in a particularly deprived part of Leeds. This project involved 20 teenage mothers and other young people, all of whom will come, with other community members, to its first showing at a well-attended and prestigious event which marks the launch of 'Breeze 2000', Leeds' arts festival for young people.

And the cost? It's not cheap. But quality does not come cheap. At first, we made videos for virtually nothing, on borrowed equipment and without paying ourselves. This could not continue. Today it is easier, but not easy enough.

I personally spend more time on writing funding applications than I do getting out and about to make videos. But that's another story...

Participatory video, then, has many strengths, and can make a lasting impact as part of a whole process of community empowerment. For the individual participant, it is an enjoyable way of learning a number of skills; technical, artistic, creative and communicative. It imparts skills that assist employability and build confidence, such as teamwork, using initiative and dealing with people—especially people in authority—outside the participant's own immediate circle. In this way, it is like other arts activities. However, with a video project there is a lasting product at the end, the video itself, which can be shown over and over again, in many different contexts, providing an on-going process of building confidence, and perhaps changing lives. Videos have been used to raise funds, to illustrate to people in power the conditions under which people are living, to highlight abuses of power and of good practice, and to show ways in which communities are fighting back and working to improve their lives. Such videos take their audience into places and allow them to meet people they would not otherwise see or come across.

For communities which lack cohesion, self-esteem and even visibility, the experience of seeing their area and/or issues portrayed constructively and with dignity on screen can bring about a profound change in consciousness and confidence. Watching videos illustrating people with whom they identify suggesting or taking action to improve their lives moves an audience from passive complaint to active engagement and involvement in change.

Making, and seeing, a participatory video has been, for the many people and communities with whom *Vera Media* has worked, a first and significant step in their taking control over their lives.

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Notes

NETWORKING newsletter, produced by *Vera Media* from 1990-2000, has a number of articles on this subject from, among other countries, Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Tanzania and Thailand as well as the UK. Contact *Vera Media* for copies and contacts.