

CHAPTER 7

COMMENTARY: PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES, REFLEXIVITY AND RESEARCH ARTEFACTS

ADRIANA PATIÑO-SANTOS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

1. Presentation

All the chapters in this collection illustrate well how conducting collaborative and participatory research with young people, far from being a straightforward process, entails a set of challenges, dilemmas and decisions when dealing with the contingencies of fieldwork and the socio-economic conditions under which research is produced. As with any kind of qualitative research, conducting collaborative research needs to be underpinned by the questions on why we conduct this kind of research, under what circumstances, and with what consequences for the participants of that research, including ourselves, the researchers. Inspired by ideas of social justice and the awareness and negotiation of power relations between the researcher and the participants, conducting collective and participatory research raises questions on what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is (co)produced by all the agents involved. The discussion arose in sociolinguistics through Deborah Cameron and her colleagues in an intriguing article published in 1993 (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson, 1993). There, they tried to make sense of the complex relationship between the researcher and those being researched by looking into three ways of doing research in social sciences: working *on*, *for*, and *with* the participants. <<On>> refers to the positivist stance towards the study of human conduct, where the researcher observes and measures human behaviour from a distance (*ethics*). <<For>> makes reference to the kind of research where the researcher speaks on behalf of those researched, and <<with>> is the kind of research wherein an attempt is made to diminish power relationships between researchers and those researched and the participants are involved in the construction of the knowledge produced. This last form, labelled by them as *advocacy*, has been revisited and questioned by the authors in more recent works (Cam-

eron, 1998). As Bucholtz, Casillas and Lee (2016) point out, <<Cameron and her colleagues note the difficulties with this perspective, including such fundamental questions as what counts as power, what counts as research, and what counts as knowledge>> (p. 26). Bucholtz and colleagues then include in the discussion the idea of <<accompaniment>>, borrowed from Freire's critical pedagogy, as a way to indicate how to negotiate power relations and avoid speaking on the participants' behalf or misrepresent the knowledge produced.

The collection of studies brought together in this book returns to these questions by distancing the writers from research *on* and *for* young participants and addressing complex considerations regarding the common dilemmas involved in doing research *with* the participants and looking to accompany them. Throughout the different chapters, we observe how all the researchers faced similar dilemmas and paradoxes while conducting collaborative and participatory research. They had to work on how to communicate the purposes of their research to (other) participants, deal with the ways in which young participants wanted to or were able to participate, and the (social, political, and economic) circumstances under which research was to be conducted. From all the research experiences reported, we can see how carrying out participatory and collaborative research is a social practice in itself, and demands a set of commitments from all the parties involved, time investment, an open attitude with a readiness to change or adjust plans, and establishing a dialogical attitude towards the other participants, which demands a continual renegotiation of the social relations that we construct in the *field*. Reflexivity becomes the way to continually monitor the consequences of the activities that they are planning (Patiño-Santos, 2019).

The works presented here offer a number of different angles for the interested reader, since they present and discuss a variety of approaches to the design of collaborative research. However, for the purposes of this afterword, I want to focus on the ways in which objects were employed in order to execute the research. Interestingly, in all the chapters of this volume, objects are seen as (research) *artefacts*, vested with meanings for those involved in these studies (adult researchers, teachers, gamers, and young participants). As highlighted by Olsen (2013) and Budach, Kell, and Patrick (2015), we live surrounded by objects and they can enter into the process of inquiry in various significant ways. In their thorough discussion on the long-neglected role of objects as representational tools, and the advantages that their acknowledgement might bring for discourse

studies, Budach *et al.* (2015), foreground the fact that artefacts can impact and generate human activity, shape interactions, and contribute to social meaning-making, across time and space(s), whilst Fenwick and her colleagues (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk, 2015) make us aware that <<Material things are performative and not inert; they are matter and they matter. They act together with other types of things and forces to exclude, invite, and regulate particular forms of participation in enactments (...)>> (p. 4). This is precisely what we can see in every chapter of this volume. As discussed below, the ways in which artefacts enter into the works reported in this book, allows us to see how they help the participants to make meaning. For example, drawings were used to represent the value of education for young people in post-conflict Sierra Leone, or posters produced on a digital platform, allowed multilingual students in Barcelona to construct an identity as language brokers outside of school. The actions planned and the artefacts used during the research design provoked unexpected responses from participants, which sometimes obliges us to rethink our original plans (see, for example, the many struggles of Valero-Porras and Cassany to find the right way to involve the young participants of their research in different moments of the fieldwork). More precisely, according to Budach *et al.* (2015), there are at least three ways in which objects can relate to humans.

1. <<Human orders achieve durability and stability beyond particular contexts of action and this can only be explained with respect to the active role played by material objects. Objects stabilise meanings in context and carry meanings across time, space, and scale>> (Budach *et al.*, 2015, p. 391). Trajectories can be traced through the resemiotization of the meaning of objects and artefacts across time and space. We can see, for example, how in Aliagas' case, her PhD thesis acted as a meaningful artefact that triggered certain actions by the participants, including contacting the researcher a few years after the thesis was produced. The thesis became a kind of personal archive for Arnau's memories that he consulted to remind himself of who he was at school, and to whom he related.

2. Once we are aware of the presence of artefacts, they themselves can structure interaction and perform specific functions in the context of the research. From the works presented in this book, it is clear how the use of digital artefacts can organise activities and shape social relations. Thus, for example, Llompart-Esbert could make visible the language practices of the multilingual students in the school she vis-

ited through the use of digital posters on *Glogster*. The task of documenting their own language practices to present them through digital posters, allowed these young people to think about ways in which they could film and report their linguistic repertoires in action.

3. Objects can change the way in which people communicate. They are invested with emotion and can structure affects; they have aesthetic and instrumental value, which can be experienced in multimodal ways, and not necessarily linguistically. All the works reported in this volume, for example, show how the use of artefacts allowed young participants to express the feelings associated with the activities they were carrying out. The production of photographs, drawings, sounds, narratives, posts of social media, and digital posters provided many opportunities for all the participants, as well as the researchers, to express themselves creatively and meaningfully.

It is important to note that artefacts are contextually dependent and their availability and use for research purposes depends on the access that all participants have to them. Socio-economic conditions would shape some of the resources that the participants drew on to plan their research and capture their *data*. Some of them could choose, and some others had to accommodate themselves to more limited circumstances, as we shall see. We must also note the agency deployed by all the participants to deal with the resources they had in order to accomplish the tasks. Bearing in mind the previous reflections, artefacts are related to the research of the works collected in this volume, in different ways.

2. Towards youngsters' active participation: Artefacts and contextual conditions

The different material conditions under which participatory and collaborative research is carried out has consequences for the kind of knowledge produced and how it is produced. Digital devices were one of the preferred artefacts that the adult and young researchers in this volume engaged to varying degrees. By acknowledging the ubiquitous presence of digital and technological artefacts in the lives of young people, mostly through mobile phones, it is rare that collaborative research does not draw on these resources in research design, as noted by Morgade, Poveda and Müller. The fact that the young participants in the works contained

in this volume are from a generation in the 21st century that has been socialised under such digital literacies, makes them a *natural* choice as a resource with which to capture the information sought during fieldwork, without significantly altering the daily life routines within the spaces that researchers have constructed as their *field* or obstructing the research process. Such an idea was central to Valero-Porras and Cassany's research, which focuses on digital activities that occur within online communities of young people in Barcelona. Digital artefacts figured in this research as the subject matter as well as the medium through which to collect data and negotiate the relationships with the participants.

The use of artefacts shaped the kind of interactions that happened between adults and young co-researchers, and/or amongst peers in the various projects documented in this volume. This use produced positive results, such as encouraging young participants to express themselves and share personal information with others. However, the use of digital artefacts can be limited by socio-economic factors that might restrict their availability. In Morgade, Poveda and Müller's case, digital devices became the medium to collect data, but also to communicate to the young participants preliminary results about their own music socialisation. Photographing and soundscaping structured the social relations between the different participants in both sites, Madrid and Brasilia, but the appropriation by students of the activities and artefacts, as well as contextual factors, led to different participation trajectories in each site. These students are immersed in a world of photographs and music but the fact that the activity was held at school, produced school material. That is, the students did not readily share information about their spontaneous vernacular practices that the adult researchers were expecting to collect. The students in Brasilia used the activity to display tensions amongst peers, which demanded the intervention of the adults. Additionally, limited access to adequate technology made the experience in Brasilia more restrictive and raised tensions among the students. In the latter case, the researchers had to create a chain of communication in order to receive the information from the students about their out-of-school activities through their parents' devices and then upload these materials to a Facebook webpage shared by the whole research team, including the students themselves. All these complexities led the researchers, amongst others, to question idealistic ideas about collaborative research, and assumptions such as the idea that digital artefacts and technology facilitate doing research with young people. As mentioned before, this kind of research is situated and highly dependent on the material conditions under which it is conducted.

Similar use of digital artefacts occurred in Llompart-Esbert's research at a secondary school in Barcelona focused on plurilingual practices at school and at home, but resulted in high levels of student and teacher engagement. The activity was framed as a school task from the very beginning, but, interestingly, the students perceived an atmosphere of trust, which encouraged them to share their out-of-school language practices comfortably. This research revealed, amongst other things, the role of students as researchers of their own practices and as language brokers for their families and communities. Through the digital artefact *Glogster*, multimodal posters were produced and used to disseminate the results from research conducted by students themselves. This proved to be a meaningful participatory activity in which the students engaged creatively. Even though the task was proposed as a piece of school-work, the use of digital artefacts to document the lived language experiences of students served to extenuate power relations and created an environment of trust and rapport in which the students felt able to express themselves and share information in their second and sometimes third languages. Some of them overcame the silence they had adopted in class, as students of migrant backgrounds in the Catalan education system, who lacked confidence because they felt non-competent as Catalan speakers.

The experience between adult researchers and young participants in Matsumoto's work, in the context of post-conflict Sierra Leone, was organised around the production of drawings. The participants were invited to represent their beliefs about the role of education in life, as well as their ideas about how an educated person looks. The drawings allowed the researcher to interpret how education is perceived as a <<key to success>>, associated with privilege and social hierarchies in the country. Through the use of drawings, the researcher managed to challenge language barriers as well as to encourage people to express themselves artistically, even though not all the participants felt that they had the necessary skills. Importantly, the researcher contrasted information gathered and interpreted from the drawings with interviews. Such a combination proved to be fascinating in terms of meaning-making since participants had the opportunity to reflect upon difficult experiences in their past, and connect them with their present and imagined future experiences—full of hope—as <<educated>> or <<potentially educated people>>. All the emotions attached to these experiences allowed us to understand the ideas about education, as a desirable goal in order to succeed, that are mobilised amongst all the groups of participants who experienced conflictive traumatic events directly or indirectly. Unfortunately, imagination contrasts

with the difficult realities described by the author of the chapter. A lack of the necessary material conditions make access to education difficult, if not impossible, for many of the participants of this research, something that is complicated by the scarcity of employment. All in all, drawings, as a tool for accessing lived experiences, turned out to be very effective.

Another way in which artefacts helped organise the relationship between adult and young participants in the collaborative projects collected in this volume is manifested in Aliagas' work. She shows how artefacts can be used to prompt stories, and how the original purpose of an artefact can be resemiotized by the users. As in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Arnau, the main character of her PhD thesis, escaped from the context in which he is presented therein, and comes back after a few years embodying the identity of an <<evolving learner>> who wishes to reopen Aliagas' research. It seems that he wants Aliagas, as the author of his literacy trajectory at school, to note that he has become a higher education learner, as if suggesting her to revisit (Burawoy, 2003) the original work in order to complete it. Discussing the thesis and the evolution of Arnau's literacy identity frames new forms of interaction between the author and her former participant. Aliagas realises the consequences of her work: Arnau has appropriated the (big) narrative that she had constructed about him a few years earlier. Arnau had converted Aliagas' PhD thesis into an artefact that carries meanings across time and space for him, but also as an object invested with emotion and affective value. As mentioned earlier, the thesis is represented as a personal archive of memories that he needs to contrast with his new reality.

The active involvement of young participants and the interesting ways in which artefacts were used by the agents involved in the research process materialise in an insightful way in the work by Valero-Porrás and Cassany. The fact that they were looking into the identities performed by four members of different online fan communities, and the fact that their site was digital, obliged the researchers to enter into continual negotiation with the young participants involved, and demanded constant reflexivity. In their own words: <<Online ethnographic fieldwork raises specific challenges in aspects such as participant recruitment, rapport building, data collection and ethical integrity>>. Digital artefacts became central to the negotiation of each stage of the research process, posing a set of challenges for adult researchers over the whole project. This piece of research shows how negotiating power relations when doing collaborative research can become a difficult, constantly evolving process, which

demands many concessions. The participants in this case exercised high agency, laid down conditions, and set limits for their participation across all the stages of the research from the very beginning: when and where they would be prepared to meet, the kind of information they wanted to share, the ways in which they wanted to be represented, etc. They negotiated positionings that in alternative approaches to research would be impossible. They were not prepared to be passive participants to be observed, nor the kind of participants on behalf of whom researchers speak. Such a form of participation obliged the researchers to share information and to maintain an attitude of <<you need to give to receive>> in order to gain access to some of the daily digital practices of these four members of the fan community in Barcelona. We perceive an intriguing, ongoing duel between the participants' demands and the sometimes creative ways the researchers found to respond to, and negotiate the unexpected challenges posed by the gamers.

3. Concluding thoughts

All in all, the five interesting stories of collaborative and participatory research included in this volume foreground important complexities and dilemmas, when conducting participatory and collaborative research, regarding the relationships established with the participants, the roles played by all the social actors involved during the fieldwork, and the ways in which what counts as knowledge is produced. In most of them we have seen how investigating young people's perceptions, courses of action, such as the construction of their own identities and experiences, entails dealing with a cohort of people who were born and raised during the digital era. For that reason, the research design draws on these artefacts in order to elicit information, but also to organise activities and disseminate results. The ways in which the digital artefacts were appropriated by the different groups of participants, as well as the material conditions affecting their access to certain artefacts and technologies, gave rise to unexpected trajectories. By drawing on Cameron and collaborators (Cameron *et al.*, 1993) and Bucholtz and her colleagues (Bucholtz *et al.*, 2016), we might highlight the fact that a *participatory* approach entails going beyond doing research *on* or *for* the participants of our research, to embrace a research *with* them, in which we *accompany* the social actors who agree to share their thoughts and experiences, and allow us to accompany them in different daily activities. *Collaborative* entails the negotiation of power relations and continually adjusting

our aims, stances and expectations. We need to attend to a set of issues: our relations with the people we work with, as well as the constraints imposed by the material, economic and social conditions under which we conduct our research. All these aspects will shape what we produce as <<results>>. The challenges and dilemmas expand beyond this process, to include questions about the dissemination of the research and the audiences and formats that we will choose for such dissemination.

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