Regular Article

Acknowledging Documentary Filmmaking as not Only an Output but a Research Process: A Case for Quality Research Practice

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Abstract

Documentary films play an important role in how we see and position ourselves in the world. While traditionally viewed as a creative practice, documentary filmmaking has been transitioning into the academic world as a way to undertake and engage with research practices. Some question marks remain, however, over the nature of documentary filmmaking as a research method. This paper seeks to build a case for documentary as a research practice using Guba and Lincoln's quality criteria, which is typically employed to ensure the trustworthiness of collected data, as a frame for sense making. This case for research innovation also draws upon the first author's previous experiences with video ethnography and the second author's expertise as a documentary film maker. Their collaboration resulted in a longitudinal research project that foregrounded documentary practices as key to data gathering and sense making. This research project sought to understand the early career experiences of Australian graduate teachers from their perspective. Using this research project as a context, this paper unpacks how seven quality criteria can be explored and addressed using documentary filmmaking as method. This work highlights the possibilities and challenges inherent in innovating in the qualitative methodology space when considering the use of documentary filmmaking practices. It also adds meaningful and practical insights to a growing groundswell of voices that recognize documentary filmmaking as a viable and valuable research method.

Keywords

documentary, filmmaking, visual ethnography, quality criteria, innovation

Documentary films have a key role to play in how we see the world, educate ourselves, and develop empathy with the lived experiences of others (Marfo, 2007). It is a genre that has significantly developed and grown over the last 100 years with recent acceleration and proliferation due to advances impacting the cost and accessibility of video capture and editing technologies (Belk, 2011). Documentaries occupy an important place in our social psyche. Whether it be an addiction to the prolific work of David Attenborough, a sense of long-term connection with the participants in Michael Apted's "Seven-Up" series, or a pull to activism with thanks to the accessible work of Damon Gameau (e.g. That Sugar Film, 2040), documentaries provide an impetus and platform for change, affirmative action and meaningful dialogue (Bacha, 2015). While their position in popular culture is undoubtedly cemented, it is really only in the last decade that the possibilities inherent in documentary filmmaking have been acknowledged as way to generate and disseminate knowledge in the academic space (Morgan et al., 2019).

As a research approach, documentary can be categorized within the genre of filmmaking research or screen production research, as it is sometimes known, which is considered a more comprehensive way to acknowledge all forms of audio-visual media and include all stages of production (e.g. screenwriting, editing, visual effects, etc.) (Kerrigan & Batty, 2015). More

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broadly, however, this approach is part of the practice research paradigm, which includes practice-led, practice-based and creative practice research (Kerrigan & Calllaghan, 2014). While questions have been raised over time about scholarly rigor of this paradigm (Webb et al., 2013), there have been substantial shifts in recognizing the value and impact of using this approach as a research lens for seeing, knowing, showing and making sense of lived experiences under study (Pink, 2013). Essentially, documentary filmmaking is a qualitative research strategy which involves and provides "an extended and intensive period of involvement in some social world" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 242). In many ways, it is an extension of the well-established research paradigm of ethnography and by expanding the signature data collection approach of participant observation to include filmmaking practices, this allows for the capture, documentation and preservation of data that more thoroughly maintains authenticity and, arguably, subjectivity (Kerrigan & Batty, 2015). This approach connects with what is referred to as visual ethnography (Pink, 2013), or some times more specifically video ethnography (Heath et al., 2010), and will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

In the research context, documentary is paving a way to attempt the representation or translation of reality into a format that is accessible, familiar and relatable (Ellis, 2012). While it seems intuitive (particularly in a society drawn in by visual representations) that documentary would be an attractive way to gather and produce legitimate forms of knowledge (Nichols, 2016), there are still question marks over the rigor of this process and its subsequent ability to stake a claim as a research approach. Societally, we are comfortable with documentary filmmaking as a source of entertainment and education, but the shift to informing research has not been so straightforward (Morgan et al., 2019). Documentary may allow us to access lived experiences in ways that are authentic and compelling, but uncertainty remains about whether this is enough when we consider research traditions and expectations, including notions of ethics and integrity. This disconnect suggests the need for further interrogation to consider whether documentary filmmaking as a research method is able to inform quality research practices. In facing up to this perceived disconnection, the intention of this paper is not to defend documentary filmmaking as a research practice, but to champion the possibilities. The myth that this approach to research is not "rigorous" enough was busted many years ago (See: Taylor, 1996). Our use and application of a well-known and applied framework to our own practice, as articulated below, seeks to highlight the existing methodological strengths inherent in documentary filmmaking.

This focus on innovative approaches to research extends on the first author's previous experiences with video ethnography (see Fitzgerald, Hackling, & Dawson, 2013) and draws on the second author's expertise as a documentary film maker (see Lowe, 2020). Based on their shared experiences through a research collaboration, this article intends to build a case for documentary filmmaking as a research practice using Guba and Lincoln's (1989) quality criteria as a frame for sense making. It is an important distinction to note that we acknowledge that documentary filmmaking is commonly viewed as a product or, in this context, a research output reliant upon audio-visual methods. We also consider, and are essentially stating a case through this paper, that documentary filmmaking can also be considered as a process and has the potential to make a significant contribution to knowledge construction and translation as a recognized academic research method. Equally, this article provides a response to calls to further build and contribute to the growing body of knowledge about documentary filmmaking practices as research method.

Documentary Film Making as Visual Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative method used by researchers to study human behavior, and importantly, to access the meanings that guide this behavior (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Ethnographers can represent and interpret the experiences of their participants through the use of naturalistic strategies (e.g., participant observation) and fieldwork (Creswell, 1998; Gobo, 2008). In an educational context, which is where this paper is situated, ethnography provides a way of gathering and interpreting rich, descriptive data about the activities and beliefs of key stakeholders, such as teachers and students (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Traditionally, ethnographic research has focused on developing a written representation of a culture, or aspects of a culture, as the result of extensive fieldwork (Berg, 2001; van Maanen, 1988). However, ethnographic field strategies are no longer isolated to the work of anthropologists, with new ethnographers being described as anyone who enters a natural setting to conduct field research (Berg, 2001). New ethnographers also have access to the latest technologies, which in this case, allows for teachers' practice to be captured, represented and analyzed. Ethnographic research often draws on multi-modal techniques in the collection of data. In recent times, this approach has seen the introduction of digital technology, such as video, as a way of capturing human interactions (Shrum et al., 2005). While there is essentially nothing new about the incorporation of the visual into ethnography (e.g., photos, sketches, paintings, film), there has been a tendency for researchers to focus on using words to describe their observations (Pole & Morrison, 2003). However, video-based data, in particular, has a rich and multi-dimensional nature that conveys a strong sense of direct experience (Schuck & Kearney, 2006). Consequently, there has been a shift toward video as a new way of presenting and practicing field research, which has seen video ethnography, or more broadly visual ethnography (see Pink, 2013), emerge (Shrum et al., 2005). In the broadest sense, video ethnography refers to "any video footage that is of ethnographic interest or is used to represent ethnographic knowledge" (Pink, 2007, p. 169).

Documentary filmmaking as research method can be considered as contributing to and extending understandings of these audio-visually focused ethnographic approaches. With a range of disciplines exploring the inherent possibilities of

documentary filmmaking in research (e.g. health, geography, tourism, sociology, etc.) (Rakic & Chambers, 2010), the use of documentary as method or research process has been equally commended and critiqued. On one hand, this research approach is acknowledged for its humanism, collaborative approach and commitment to long-term immersion, but on the other hand it is criticized for oversimplifying and manipulating data (Grimshaw, 2002). It is, however, difficult to ignore the similarities that intersect in the act of conducting research and the process of documentary filmmaking. For example, identifying a question to explore, planning the design approach, use of similar data collection techniques (e.g. observations, interviews), and analyzing narratives as a way of sense making using both systematic processes and creative interpretations (Goodman, 2004). While differences between documentary filmmaking and the research process, including different goals, ways of documenting events, and presenting data, the potential for mutual benefits in combining these two traditions is evident (Morgan et al., 2019). Again, it is important to reiterate that this paper positions documentary filmmaking as a legitimate approach to informing the collection and analysis of research data rather than simply being a research output relying on audio-visual methods.

Contextual Features of Focal Study

This article draws on the experiences of the authors in using documentary filmmaking as a research method to explore the lived experiences of graduate teachers as they navigated and negotiated their early years in the classroom (see Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2018). This project was borne out of a desire to better understand the factors influencing teacher retention with research suggesting that up to 40% of graduate teachers in Australia, the context for this study, are leaving the profession in their first 5 years (Bahr & Ferreira, 2018). While some of the factors impacting on graduate retention are largely understood, there is little research from the perspective of graduates' own lived experiences. In understanding this gap, this project endeavored to work alongside five graduate teachers in documenting their early career experiences over a 12-month period. The research question driving this project was *what characterizes the experiences of Australian graduate teachers as they continue in their learning to teach journey post-tertiary study?* Documentary filmmaking was considered as an innovative way to address this gap and meaningfully respond to this question.

The participants were five graduate teachers (four female and one male) with a variety of education backgrounds (e.g. undergraduate and postgraduate initial teacher education qualifications, primary, secondary, international student) and experiences (e.g. teaching in urban/rural/international settings, different sectors (e.g. private schooling, government schooling, etc.), casual relief teaching). These graduates were embarking on their first or second year in the classroom following the completion of an Education degree from a university located in south-eastern Australia. As participants in this research project, they agreed to keep what could essentially be summed up

Table 1. Distribution of Video Journal Entries Across the Project.

Participant	Number of video journal entries	Average length of video journal entries (minutes)
Participant 1	24	2.28 mins
Participant 2	8	6.92 mins
Participant 3	25	3.47 mins
Participant 4	16	4.86 mins
Participant 5	18	3.53 mins

as a video journal over the course of a year as their reflective practice. This meant taking a few minutes every couple of weeks to video capture their reflections on their experiences of being a graduate teacher. The graduates were each provided with a GoPro camera and tripod along with some basic training on how to record footage with good quality vision and sound. In reality, each participant engaged in the documentary process in ways that reflected their schedules, level of commitment and the occurrence of events which compelled them to reflect on camera, which resulted in video entries being logged every 1– 5 weeks spanning 2–10 minutes in length.

The data collection involved two different documentary filmmaking processes. The first process was in-depth interview (1 hour) at start and end of project with each participant (two over the year, 10 interviews in total). This was a set piece direct to camera with the researcher and documentary filmmaker asking the graduate teacher a series of questions to initially set a context (Interview 1) and then to summarize learnings (Interview 2). A camera operator and sound technician supported this process. The second process involved the participants recording and sharing video journals over the course of a year without any direction or the support of a camera operator and sound technician. These videos were typically filmed in the participants' homes, but sometimes in their car or an outside location. Over 100 video journal entries were logged. Distribution of entries across the five participants is captured in the table below (See Table 1).

The result of this research project was a 90-minute documentary film that provides insights into the lived and longitudinal experiences of graduate teachers in Australia that are rich in detail and starkly point to where the gaps in support are for graduate teachers (see Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2018, for access to this final product, which has been viewed 69 times in an 18-month time period. Please note that the documentary has not had official distribution—either academic or public facing—aside from the authors personal contacts and colleagues). The documentary is edited in a linear way to accurately showcase the graduates' reflections as they happened term-by-term over the 12-month period. Each participant has a particular critical incident that becomes a key thread running through their narrative over time with similarities and differences in experiences juxtaposed. In the case of this research project, documentary filmmaking as a research method provides rich and authentic insights that would not be easily captured and shared with the

same authenticity and transparency using other data sources (Walker & Boyer, 2018).

Sense Making Using Quality Criteria

The criteria developed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) form the basis of this study and provide a frame from which to make sense of documentary filmmaking as a research practice. These criteria have been used in this case because they are widely used and applied in qualitative research practices. Our intention in adopting this well-known paradigm, as opposed to another framework or approach, is to further highlight the intersections between documentary filmmaking practices and recognized qualitatively-focused research practices. The authors refer to these seven quality criteria as "intending to parallel the rigor criteria that have been used within the conventional paradigm for many years" (p. 233), but were not constructed to reflect the qualities of interpretivist paradigms, such as grounded theory. More quantitative approaches to research would seek to ascertain internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, while their parallel qualitative counterparts include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Guba and Lincoln (1989) also introduced authenticity criteria, which include fairness, and ontological and educative authenticity. Each of these criteria will be explored in relation to how they can be demonstrated through documentary filmmaking using examples from the research study that provides context for this particular paper. Importantly, these criteria can be considered and applied to other qualitative research projects that are informed by audio-visual methods.

Credibility

Credibility involves establishing whether the findings from the research are believable from the perspective of the participants. Several methods of ensuring the credibility of a study were outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989), but two of the named strategies are particularly relevant when considering documentary filmmaking as a research method: prolonged engagement and persistent observation. Often documentaries are longitudinal in nature and therefore prolonged engagement with research participants is relatively easy to achieve when applying this approach. In the context of the graduate teachers' project, the bounds provided by a school year's uniform structure and school terms assisted in guiding how and when the engagement with the participants would work. It is important to note that the notion of prolonged engagement is not solely connected with the data collection process, but with the relationships built with the research participants. Again, in the context of this specific project, the first author had engaged with the five graduate teachers in a variety of ways for up to 2 years, which greatly supported the building of trust and rapport that is required for a documentary-led research project (e.g. highly personalized, non-anonymized, etc.). Persistent observation is a key feature of the use of documentary as method that is difficult to achieve using other data collection tools. A sufficient level of observation enables the researcher, as Guba and Lincoln (1989) put it, to "identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and to focus on them in detail" (p. 235). The use of the video journals as a data source not only enabled repeat viewing, but provide access to authentic and genuine reflections that would be difficult capture using more prescribed process, such as individual interviews, focus groups, or written insights. In the graduate teacher project, the participants had the autonomy to make decisions about which video journals they ultimately submitted to be part of the data set. While this self-determination is an important feature of the ethical integrity of this research approach, it does mean that participants are ultimately self-selecting and moderating what is and is not considered as part of the data set.

Transferability

Transferability is considered the ability to generalize from a study to the wider community in which it is set (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The graduate teacher research project was borne out of a grappling with a nationwide problem by focusing on a small cohort to gather detailed and nuanced understandings of their lived experiences. The study relied on the development of rich descriptions of events, people, beliefs and knowledges over the course of a school year and through the video journals. A key of using documentary as a methodological approach is that the visual nature of the descriptions to enable the viewer to have a vicarious experience and engage in their own sense making regarding the extent to which the contexts and experiences may have wider applicability to their setting. The authentic nature of the documentary data provides a level of objective that is difficult to achieve in non-visual modes (e.g. a written case study). Equally, the presentation of the data as a linear narrative further assists those who engage with documentary-based research to relate to the findings and be more able to engage in key learnings that might be relevant for their context.

Dependability

To ensure the data generated from the documentary filmmaking process can be considered as dependable, an audit trail was developed. This process refers to the logic and decision-making informing both the research process using documentary as a method and the process of creating the documentary as a product. An important consideration for this quality criteria is that the authors were clear in their role delineation. The first author focused on ensuring a consistent research approach was applied across the project, while the second author worked on the construction of the narrative. Regularly discussions were had between both authors to ensure each process was informed by the other and that decisions were not made in isolation, but most importantly the documentary narrative was formed by the research process and the research process was not altered to support the documentary narrative.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings from the research can be confirmed or corroborated by others (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). As outline by Guba and Lincoln, the confirmability criteria focus on establishing that the data, interpretations and evaluations of the research are grounded in the situation and the participants. The evidence for this can be found in the inescapable richness of the data set created through using documentary filmmaking as method. In this case, the final documentary output was created using assembly editing and was informed by the emergent themes in the lived experiences of each graduate and shared using the school year (e.g. term-based, which is typically four 10-week blocks) as a measure of timeframe. This approach privileged capturing the reality of the experience over producing creative endpoint. While entertainment wasn't the intention, the graduate teacher document, which is grounded in the individual's context and intertwines the five stories as a wider point of reference, is certainly compelling viewing. As the participating graduate teachers were provided with editorial control and authorship through the provision of their final endorsement, this approach helped to reduce any personal bias and distortion by the authors.

Fairness

There are two techniques that can be employed to ensure fairness in a research study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To start with, there is a need to provide opportunities for all stakeholders to reflect upon the construction of the research. In the case of the graduate teacher study, as the narrative of the documentary was constructed, the participants were consulted and provided with the ability to maintain full authorship over the story that was told. Due to the nature of documentary filmmaking as a research approach, the ways in which the data is represented cannot be easily or effectively de-identified so therefore collaboration and full transparency in what is produced is required. As the project came to the end, the participants were given access to the full-length documentary and provided with the opportunity for last comments on the final product. No concerns were raised about specific content they felt was missing or that they were not comfortable sharing. It is noteworthy that we could tell based on video coding that not all recorded entries were uploaded for sharing. This suggests that the participants engaged in their own filtering processes about which of their stories were shared (or not). Next, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that there is the need for "the open negotiation of recommendations and the agenda for subsequent action" (p. 246). In keeping the research agenda transparent and to honor the generosity of the graduate teachers, they were consulted throughout the research project to inform decision making.

Ontological Authenticity

Ontological authenticity is achieved through participants constructing their own understandings of what is taking place over the duration of the research process. In this instance, the use of documentary filmmaking processes as a way to collect data provided the graduate teachers with a platform and purpose for engaging in a reflective practice. With the footage gathered over the period of year, this representation of time allows the graduates to use their video journal posts as a "time capsule" of sorts to look back over and recognize their growth over time. Providing the graduates with training in effective filmmaking techniques ensured that they had full knowledge of the research process and the tools to make sure that this approach was not only participatory, but they had full authorship over essentially what was shared (and not) to contribute to the final product (a feature-length documentary).

Educative Authenticity

Educative authenticity is measured by the extent to which research is useful and meaningful to others. The authors felt strongly that this documentary needed to be viewed as having practical implications for not only understanding the experience of graduate teachers, but in better preparing pre-service teachers for the potential reality of what it might mean to be an early career teacher. Steps toward ensuring educative authenticity were realized through hosting an event for pre-service teachers to engage with the documentary participants staged as a panel discussion. All five graduates identified a film sequence of up to five minutes to screen with two participants present to talk to these experiences and answer questions from the audience. The attending pre-service teachers noted the power in hearing and learning directly from watching and listening to the experiences of peers. Another way to enhance the educative value and use of the documentary was to launch it as part of a World Teachers Day event (held internationally each October) with staff from the national regulatory authority, Australian Institute of School and Teacher Leadership (AITSL), in a similar panel discussion format with chosen documentary excerpts to generate conversation between four of the participating graduate teachers and a large group of education administrators. The value of this approach was the increased visibility of the documentary with an audience who has the potential to institute systemic change in support for graduate teachers. Further to these two approaches, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested a strategy for achieving educative authenticity is evident in "the testimony of selected participants in the process [who] will attest to the fact that they have comprehended and understood the constructions of others different from themselves" (p. 249). Through this study, there is anecdotal evidence that not only did the graduates learn about themselves as people and teachers through the documentation of their learning to teach journey, but in viewing the footage of their peers they were reassured that they were not alone in the challenges and hurdles they faced.

Moving Beyond Guba and Lincoln

The quality criteria, as described in detail above, provide a valuable anchor point for highlighting the intersectionality

apparent in the practices used in both documentary filmmaking and qualitative research. However, the intention of the authors was not to use this paper to defend the approaches they have adopted and classified as a research practice. Rather by working from a point of familiarity assists in enhancing the accessibility of this innovative methodology in the fields of study that may be unfamiliar with or resistant to the notion of documentary filmmaking as a process, not just a product. There is an opportunity, however, to further delve into this research practice by considering the work of public ethnography as a way of connecting with audiences that could be defined as non-academic (Gans, 2010). Public ethnography pushes our connection with research in meaningful and relevant ways through two key approaches: mediated public ethnography and engaged public ethnography (see: Vannini, 2018). Mediated public ethnography brings life to research through the use of non-academic media as a way of disseminating research findings, while engaged public ethnography engages with research approaches that rely on participatory and community-based engagement (Vannini, 2013). In this case, for example, the research was *meditated* through a full-length feature documentary, which *engaged* the participating graduate teachers in curating their own story through the decisions they made about the video journal entries they chose to share. Using the lens of public ethnography in conjunction with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) quality criteria has the ability to not only result in quality research, but research that speaks to and impacts broader audiences (Walker & Boyer, 2018).

Conclusion

Documentary films are compelling in these sense that they provide us with access to the stories and lived experiences of individuals. When trust and rapport are truly established between the filmmaker and the subject the result can be one that is authentic, genuine and truly enlightening. This storytelling tradition and the rich insights it provides can be translated into the research sphere, but care must be taken to ensure that quality as it is understood in research paradigms is foregrounded.

Uniquely, this paper documents the use of a Guba and Lincoln's (1989) quality criteria as a framework for supporting the translation of documentary filmmaking into an approach that is grounded in research methodology. Links are made to the quality criteria through contextualizing practices used by the authors as they explored the use of documentary as method through a longitudinal research project. Opportunities for pushing the boundaries further are also highlighted through the consideration of public ethnography as a means for increasing the relevance and influence of a research story beyond the traditional bounds of the academy.

This paper shines a light on the possibilities and challenges inherent in innovating in the qualitative methodology space, particularly in relation ethnography-focused approaches, when using documentary filmmaking practices. The practices associated with this tradition have a natural synergy with applied research approaches, therefore a significant shift in thinking and/or actions is not necessarily required. What is necessary, however, is a cognizance on behalf of the researcher about how to appropriately lift and connect documentary filmmaking practices with research practices that are recognized as appropriate and of a high-quality by the wider academy. This work highlights a way in which this might be meaningfully achieved and adds to existing conversations acknowledging documentary as a viable and valuable research method.

Author Note

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