

Seeing and hearing data – reflections of a video interviewer

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Abstract

This paper reflects on my first experience as a video interviewer whilst gathering data for my PhD research into ethics and dance. Practical matters such as, the placing of the camera during interviewing are discussed as well as the considerable time issues connected with transcribing video data. Sections such as 'Seeing is believing' and 'Getting the whole picture' explore some of the potential benefits of having non verbal as well as verbal data. The paper discusses the influence on the recording method of dance teachers as interviewees especially as many are already used to being recorded on video. Specific ethical issues of consent and confidentiality are highlighted in relation to using this data recording method. The paper benefits from the inclusion of some still shots from one of the interviews to further demonstrate some of the points made. This was only possible as a result of this particular interviewee deciding to wave her confidentiality and anonymity. It is hoped that these reflections might offer some useful insight into this exciting if not slightly daunting, data recording method.

Introduction

As part of my doctoral research into ethics and dance I interviewed dance teachers to find out about their experiences of learning to dance and teach. I used a video camera to record the data. This paper reflects on some of my experiences of being a video interviewer. Using video to record semi-structured, face-to-face, interviews was a new experience for me as a researcher. It was not without its challenges but it also provided some 'wow' moments too.

As with most research studies there are practical matters to consider as well as ethical issues to address. Some of the practical matters I encountered specifically relating to the use of a video camera in the interview environment are discussed. Time issues relating to transcribing and analysis of data recorded on video are considered, briefly, in comparison to other methods. Key ethical issues concerning consent and confidentiality relating to video interviewing are highlighted and discussed.

I never thought I would be able to share any of the actual visual aspects of the video interviews that I carried out. After all it was never intended that the videos would be seen by the outside world. Gathered data was to be anonymised and identities of participants not revealed. This changed when one of the interviewees, Esther, informed me after her interview that she would be happy for me to use the video of her interview and show it to others. Before using any of the video or captured photos from the video I checked with Esther that I did indeed have her consent to use the video. Having this confirmation has enabled me to share aspects of my experience as a video interviewer that otherwise would not have been possible.

Video interviewing

It was never my intention, in the beginning, to use a video camera as the instrument for recording the data collected from interviews with dance teachers as part of my doctoral research. I was planning to use audio taping which is a more commonly used method in this type of qualitative research. I am not exactly sure when I made the leap from audio to audio/visual. But make it I did.

Before reflecting on my experience let me first clarify what I mean by video interviewer or video interviewing. The actual data collection method was of course the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The device that I used to record this data was a video camera. So the video is not the research method but the technology or gadget used to record that data gathered through the research method (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). When I use the term video interviewing I am

referring to interviews carried out in the presence of a video camera recording the data. Equally describing myself, as a video interviewer, refers to my role as interviewer being carried out in the presence of a video camera. It does not mean that the camera was the method of data collection. There is a difference between the video camera being used as a tool for recording and storing data and it as a method of data collection. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) make a clear distinction between the video camera as a tool to record and store data and using it as a data collection method. In order to function as the latter would require that instead of gathering data via interviews I would have (with permission) needed to set up the video camera to record the dance teachers in their daily work. The recordings could then be used as data. Of course the data generated would be quite different to the sort of data gathered from semi-structured interviews (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). With this hopefully somewhat clearer we can return to the matter in hand.

My previous experience with a video camera, apart from the usual family stuff, was in using it as a training and development tool in my work with dance teachers. This obviously helped with the practicalities of setting up and using the camera but did not offer much, if anything, in the way of knowledge about video interviewing and the sort of challenges and benefits that are associated with it and discussed below.

Looking back I realise that I might have rather naively believed, at least for a short time, that videoing the interviews would make my job as researcher easier. After all having the data, en masse as it were, would surely be helpful in drawing out more from the data. Certainly I can say now that I have been through the experience that it did not make my job easier in the sense that there were additional practical and time issues to deal with that I did not encounter when using only audio data in the past. In another sense it did make my job easier because having the video enables me to return to each interview time and time again and bring it back to life. It is like being transported back to the moment when the interview actually took place.

As I discovered, a number of the issues and considerations relating to video interviewing are not so different from those arising with other data recording methods and I will discuss them later. The visual aspect of video not surprisingly, presents

specific ethical concerns regarding consent and confidentiality. But it has much to offer as the next section demonstrates.

Seeing is believing

'Up to 93% of what is communicated between people is non verbal'

Richard Green (1995)
Get a Life TV programme

The above quote from American body language expert, Richard Green suggests an extraordinarily high percentage of people talk in actions rather than words. Even if we do not accept that the figure is as high as 93% it demonstrates that non verbal communication is a very important part of our day to day communications.

Furthermore it suggests that there is much to be gained from being able to see as well as hear what is being said. I found considerable advantage in accuracy and reliability of data. For example, characterisation was clearer and more precise than if I had been reliant on a combination of written notes and recollections to remind me of how an interviewee acted when telling her tale. Having a video meant I was able to watch it again and again to see specific details and how they were presented.

There is also something to be said about being able to see the truthfulness of what is being said. It can assist where there is conflict between talk and behaviour and an example of this is provided later. That said, it does not mean that an interviewee cannot be a great actor and do a good job of playing a part. However there seems little point in being misleading in this sort of case.

I am not an expert in body language but I do not believe that one has to be in order to benefit from having data on video. After all most of us read body language all the time as a natural part of our communications with others. How often have you heard someone say something along the lines of 'I could tell she was worried from the look on her face'? Or, 'he said it didn't matter but I could tell from the way he stood, that it did'. The medical profession takes this to another level. In *The Body in Question*, Jonathan Miller (1979) discusses how the non verbal communication that a patient

uses in relation to pain helps the doctor in diagnosis. He calls it 'the pantomime of complaint'.

In fact, a lot can be learnt about a pain from the way in which the patient points to it. Apart from saying something about where it is, the movement of the hand is often a tell-tale sign of its quality: if someone has angina, he often presses the front of his chest with a clenched fist, the whole fist shows that the pain has a gripping quality. The pain from peptic ulcer is often closely localised, and the patient usually tells you so by delicately pointing to it with the tip of index finger.....Even if the patient doesn't describe this movement in words, he will sometimes do so by holding his side with the thumb at the back and the fingers pointing down at the front The skilled physician can learn a lot from the pantomime of complaint.

Visual communication is an integral part of dance. Dance teachers actively make use of visual communicating skills in their teaching role. A whole variety of demonstrations are used to communicate aspects of dance to the youngest beginner through to the professional performer. Teachers purposefully develop a critical eye for observing and analysing dancers and their performances. So it is hardly surprising that many teachers use demonstration and visual action to accompany or even, replace aspects of verbal conversations. I recall attending a teachers' development day two or three years ago where one of the presenters appeared uneasy introducing her session to the audience. She commented on not being very comfortable talking to the audience because she was more used to communication that involved demonstration. This was evident as she started to teach the class. Her uneasiness was immediately transformed into a confident teaching approach as she turned her back on the audience and began communicating with the students using gestures and movements backed up with appropriate talk.

I wanted to be able to see the data as well as hear the data. I wanted to get as complete a picture as possible. In having this whole picture, the characterisation is clearer and more precise. I could choose to see and hear the whole picture but I could also choose at times to only 'hear' or only 'see' the data. Through doing this I became aware of how much being able to see as well as hear the data added to the study.

It is not only dance teachers who use visual action to enhance the spoken word. Many people do it regularly, often without realising. If, for example, you ask

someone to tell you how to tie shoelaces it is very likely that he will offer some sort of demonstration of the process rather than providing detailed verbal instructions. If one was to attempt to follow the verbal instructions without seeing the visual actions, it is likely that it would prove difficult as they would be incomplete. What this tells us is that there are a number of elements, that when combined, give us a whole picture. The next section looks at this in relation to the study.

Getting the whole picture

The Latin phrase `facta non verba' (actions speak louder than words) suggests that non verbal communication is more meaningful than verbal. I would not say that this is the case with video interviewing. The biggest benefit for me has nothing to do with one aspect of data being more important than another. It has much more to do with getting the whole picture precisely as it happened at the interview. It means that I can review what was said, how it was said, the body language, the expressions, the posture, the pauses and many of the finer details that I would have undoubtedly missed without a video recording. However even with a video recording it is still possible to miss something important as the following example demonstrates.

During one interview the interviewee told me about how her childhood dance teacher had managed to discipline her pupils without any apparent, effort. She had not even needed to raise her voice in class. She said “we respected her and she didn’t need to tell us to behave”. After the interview when the camera and tripod had just been packed away the interviewee and I were just chatting. Discipline in class was mentioned again and this time when she mentioned her childhood teacher she added “of course she did carry a big stick”. She had not made the connection between her dance teacher carrying a big stick in class and the class of well behaved dance students. This brought to life what I had been told previously on a number of occasions by very experienced researchers that the best data can often occur after the interview has finished and often as a throwaway remark.

Along with the completeness that video interviewing offers are considerations that I needed to address. The next section explores some of them.

Considerations

Considerations for video interviewing are much the same as for other interview methods. Take for example, the concern that participants might act differently when there is a camera present. This concern is not one solely relating to the presence of a video camera. The potential exists for participants to act differently in other interview methodologies too. Some participants may act differently when an audio tape or recorder is present (Bell, 1996). Equally some interviewees may respond differently or be distracted if the interviewer makes written notes during the interview. It may not be possible to eradicate totally the impact of recording methods on the interviewee but we can test the water to find out if it a method has potential as a method with certain populations.

My method of testing the water was to carry out a brief pilot study in an attempt to determine whether the presence of the video camera would be detrimental at interview. A small group of dance teachers that I was working with at the time agreed to participate and discuss their experiences with me afterwards. I was aware that setting the camera up right in front of the interviewees could be obtrusive. So I deliberately placed it in a corner of the room out of the main eye line of the interviewee. To avoid potential restrictions regarding where I could place the camera I used battery power rather than connecting to mains electricity. It was agreed with participants that the camera would be switched on at the start of the interview and turned off once the interview had finished. Thus reducing any interference caused by drawing attention to the camera's presence during the interview. The outcome of the pilot suggested that once the camera was running and the interview begun the camera was ignored. This was confirmed by the participants in the post study discussions. This outcome was not unexpected as many dance teachers are familiar with the use of video in their work as is demonstrated later.

It is essential to mention at this point that anyone considering this type of data recording needs to be aware that there are serious time issues. The trade-off for obtaining the whole picture and such complete data is the time it takes to transcribe and analyse the data. I found that it took considerably more than the usually

suggested 10 hours of transcribing for each hour of audio recorded data. Initially I spent quite some time trying to find the best way for me to watch, listen, rewind and type. I tried a variety of methods from having it all on one computer, to using two computers as well as using a separate DVD player with a hard disk. I am not sure that one method was hugely better than another as each had its particular challenges. What I did in the end was to watch each interview video two or three times to identify specific sections to transcribe. Then I transcribed only these sections. This reduced the transcribing time although to be fair it was still a lengthy process. That said I would use video again in a similar situation especially with a sample population familiar with being videoed such as dance teachers. The next section explores one reason why the video camera was not intrusive at these interviews.

Used to being watched

Watching and being watched is all part of a dance teacher's role. It is the nature of the job of teaching dance. Most dance teachers today will have been filmed in connection with their work at some point. It might have been in relation to a demonstration or performance, creation of a learning tool or perhaps to evaluate teaching practice. It has become the norm for master classes and other lectures at dance teaching conferences to be videoed for educational purposes. This means that dance teachers are familiar with having a video camera recording various aspects of their professional life. So it is not something they are unfamiliar with.

Dance teachers value visual material. The use of demonstration, diagrams of good alignment and aesthetic pictures of dancers are all tools of the dance teacher's trade. With the increase in filming at conferences and of dance generally there is a growing choice of visual resources available to the dance teacher. In my experience working with dance teachers over many years dance teachers prefer visual learning resources. This means that they like to learn from pictures and visual information rather than from, say, the written word (Cottrell, 2003). The rise in availability of visual resources is therefore, welcomed by dance teachers.

It is worth noting that we have all had to get used to being watched due to the current trend for CCTV cameras. They seem to be everywhere recording our movements as we go about our daily lives. We do not appear to have a choice about whether we consent to being filmed. In contrast, seeking and gaining informed consent from participants is an essential element for this type of qualitative study. The next section discusses the particular issues of consent that arose within my study relating to video interviewing.

Consent

Informed consent is a requirement for research involving human participants (McFee, 2005, Welsh, 1999). In its simplest form, informed consent refers to the participant being informed about what she is giving consent for. Furthermore such consent needs to be given voluntarily and without coercion. It is not of course not that simple as McFee (2005) demonstrates in his exploration into the meaning of 'informed consent'. The information and consent sheets I prepared and distributed to potential participants satisfied McFee's (2005) list of minimal conditions for informed consent by giving information about the researcher, the research topic and aims as well as saying how the data might be used. Participants were given opportunities to clarify understanding of the information provided and they were free to make their own decision about taking part in the research. The participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason was also made clear. The information sheet mentioned that, with their permission, I wanted to record the interviews and I also checked with each participant individually to ensure they were aware that I hoped to be able to video the interviews.

I expected to encounter some degree of concern about recording interviews on video. What surprised me was that my concerns were totally unfounded. In fact, the participating teachers said yes almost without question. This raised some concerns for me in relation to participants being fully 'informed'. I wanted to be sure that they knew what they were consenting to. So I discussed the role of the video with each of them in detail to ensure they were comfortable with this method of data collection and also how the data might be used in the future. Attention was drawn again to the clause in the information sheet giving each participant the right to withdraw from the

research at any time without giving a reason. No one changed their mind about participating in the study following these conversations and I was more comfortable knowing that I had taken steps to as far as possible ensure that participants were informed.

In line with participant consent, the intention was to anonymise the data gathered through the video interviews. However this changed when one participant changed the goal posts as far as her own data was concerned. She unexpectedly decided to relinquish her anonymity. This happened once the interview had finished and I was beginning to pack up the camera. When asked about this decision she simply said that she was happy for me to use the video in its entirety and that there was nothing in it that I could not be use. Wow, this was totally unexpected. I had no idea that this would happen and I was unprepared for it. At the next opportunity I discussed the matter with my doctoral supervisor and it was agreed that as the offer was given freely and not coerced then it was reasonable to accept in so far as the participant was still in agreement. Esther was and still is happy for me to use her video. It is because of her generosity in allowing her data and identity to be shared with you that the photographs and other inclusions in this paper are possible.

It would be unethical to ask a participant to change their consent in order to relinquish their right to anonymity after data collection had taken place. After all many people only agree to participate in research providing their anonymity is assured. Such a request could easily suggest to participants that this had been, rightly or wrongly, the researcher's intention all along. There was and is no question of me considering approaching the other participants to ask them to review their consent. The reason I am able to use Esther's data is because the offer came from her and it was unsolicited. I have not and will not, approach the other participants about this and their data, rightly, remains anonymous.

One of the benefits of having informed consent to use the video of Esther's interview is that it can be used to demonstrate the methodology of video interviewing. In this paper I have used stills captured from the video to give a flavour of how the visual contributes to the data as a whole. Earlier this year I gave a short PowerPoint presentation about this methodology and I included a number of short clips from the

video. Despite testing and re-testing the presentation a number of times I still encountered problems with the video clips on the day. In the end, it took a joint effort but we managed to get them to work although not as well as I had hoped. I have now added 'movies in a PowerPoint presentation' to the saying: never work with children and animals. This has not put me off. There are other ways of playing the video to demonstrate the methodology. It could for example, be shown on a video or DVD player which would remove the precise, technological challenges of showing it embedded within a PowerPoint presentation. I am convinced that there is much value in being able to explore video interview data from a methodological perspective. For this reason I will continue to explore ways of ironing out technical hitches.

Along with issues of consent there are also matters of confidentiality to consider in relation to video interviewing. These are briefly discussed next.

Confidentiality

Just as with other forms of data collection and use of data, it is essential to observe and preserve participant confidentiality. Some issues of confidentiality relating to video interviewing are no different to those that arise in other methods. For example, once video data is transcribed the issues of confidentiality are the same as for any other transcription. Names can be changed to give anonymity to the participants and preserve confidentiality.

Video, however, is not anonymous. It was a lucky occurrence Esther offering me the use of her interview video to be used for a purpose other than originally agreed. Without this agreement it would not have been possible for me to show any video footage or indeed any still photographs from Esther's interview without identifying her. It might technically be possible to anonymise video by means of pixilation it has, however, considerable disadvantages. A major consideration is that this method of anonymising video removes much of the value and purpose of using it at all. Facial expressions and other visual data are lost. In addition it is a time consuming process with considerable cost implications. I do not believe that the Esther's video would have the same value if it had been anonymised by means of pixilation. In fact, even

using pixilation it is difficult to see how anonymity could be successfully achieved in a video of this nature.

Esther's consent to waving her confidentiality and anonymity has enabled me to include some photographs from her interview in the following section. I hope they go some way towards demonstrating their value in supporting the reliability of data.

Reliability of data

I want to briefly explore below, two types of non verbal data gathered from the interviews in this study - body language and intentional demonstration.

Let us consider body language first of all as I mentioned it earlier. We communicate with body language all the time. It is an integral part of how we communicate with others. Although I am not formally trained in body language I, like many of us, spend a good deal of time actively using it and trying to make sense of it.

The photographs below, captured from the video interview, say something to us on their own. The body language gives us information about the tone of what is being said. It might be reinforcing what is being said or showing where there is conflict between behaviour and what is being said as mentioned earlier. It is possible to choose to see and hear the data separately as well as in its complete form. This can be achieved through listening without watching or watching without listening. I found this useful when I wanted to explore how the actions and the words each contribute to the whole picture.



In this first photograph, Esther's body language suggests that she is talking about something serious or concerning. Indeed this is the case. In this instance the body language is reinforcing the seriousness of what she is saying about her past dance teachers.

“There was nothing I could not ask her. There was nothing that she wouldn't have an answer for. I felt completely safe with her. I could move mountains with her (small laugh).”

In contrast, the body language in the second photograph, below, presents a much more light-hearted or relaxed pose. At this point in the interview Esther is questioning the choice of lecturers on a dance teacher course and she says:-

“They are just label chasing. You know, like they have to wear the Gucci handbag or the Gucci glasses. I don't want the label to teach us with the Gucci brand name on them. I want the teachers who actually can teach. (short nervous laugh) It makes me very sad when there is obviously that talent and yet these people are locked up in a cupboard somewhere.”

The body language here is relaxed. This pose is consistent with the light-hearted tone of voice that is used to talk about the matter. However, both the tone of voice and visual data conflict with the content of what is being said. It is as if the



seriousness of the matter is reduced by discussing it in this manner. The significance of what is being said is still there but it is not immediately apparent.

In contrast, intentional demonstration is different. It is not so much about reading about reading actual body language. It is more about reading the actions and movements to explain or partly explain what you are saying. The intentional demonstration might add to the conversation or what is often the case, fill a pause or gap of silence, in the conversation. This is demonstrated many times throughout the video data. In some instances an interviewee would start to say something, then pause, before finishing the sentence with a physical action or movement in explanation of the point being made. There are also examples of interviewees using visual actions to enhance what they are saying. For instance, using a revolving or turning motion of the hand to denote turning. The level of this intentional demonstration being raised at times to denote not only the general concept of turning but to demonstrate the type, direction or speed of a turn.

Dance teachers probably use intentional demonstration because they are familiar with the use of demonstration as a method of communicating in their work. As a dance teacher myself I am used to reading this type of non verbal communication. Someone else with a similar training would be able to get the same from this data.



In this photograph Esther is using intentional demonstration as she discusses her acrobatic training. The hand and arm actions reflect the support given by a teacher to a student, learning certain acrobatic tricks. Anyone who is experienced in the learning and teaching of

acrobatics would immediately recognise this demonstration. In this instance, the demonstration is easier to understand than having to go through lengthy explanations.

The photograph below shows Esther using intentional demonstration to describe a particular movement. She uses her hand and arm to demonstrate a movement of the leg carried behind the body. She was describing the movement that caused her to have a major fall when she was a young dancer which severely damaged her back and led to a lengthy rehabilitation period over a number of years. It was this accident that led to Esther changing her career path from performer to teacher.



In conclusion

Reflecting on some of my experiences of video interviewing has been a useful process. It has shown me that using a video camera to record interview data has many potential benefits relating to the quality and amount of data available. Even taking into consideration the time issues concerning transcribing and analysis, I believe the method has much to offer and providing that sufficient time was available, I would certainly use this method again.

Having consent to use Esther's actual recorded video data has enabled me to include examples of still shots and in this way enhance the written word. I have found this to be an extremely useful way to provide the reader with additional data. I am, therefore, considering including certain sections of her recorded data on DVD to accompany my final PhD thesis.

Issues of consent and confidentiality have been briefly addressed and I hope that I have managed to highlight the importance of them in the video interviewing context.

This paper has raised awareness of some of the issues, practical and ethical which can arise when using a video camera to record interview data. I hope that in some way, my experience will be useful to others considering this method of data recording.

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