The idea of a field school in applied visual anthropology

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Introduction

My vision of applied visual anthropology is the production of films made primarily for the benefit of indigenous people -- secondarily for use in university classrooms: Such films are “interventions” offering information designed to influence and change attitudes and behavior in the films’ viewers. Over the last two years, my students and I have participated in a Tanzania field school in which we produced seven or eight intervention films. These films will be taken on the road in Tanzania next summer, to homesteads and urban centers in an educational media campaign. We do intend to film the campaign.

Hurdles and administrative choices

To my knowledge no other field schools exist in applied visual anthropology. To make the way easier for others, I want to describe the inevitable hurdles I sought to overcome as the school administrator, give an overview of the benefits and difficulties experienced by students and others in the school, and outline the Rashomon-like strategy we used in our most recent intervention design.

One of the fundamental decisions I had to make in developing the school concerned the location in which students should be “placed” for shooting intervention documentaries.

In 2008, my former student, Shamia Sandles (whose paper will be read in a moment) and I collaborated with several Maasai university graduates in the filming of the catastrophic fate that faces urban Maasai migrants. Each day we would film in a different part of Dar es Salaam, almost never seeing the same people twice. The result was a legitimate ethnographic overview of urban conditions. But the filming experience lacked many qualities of traditional ethnographic research that I wanted my future school filmmaking students to experience. So, I decided that the 2009 students should live in a single Maasai homestead long enough to get to know the rhythms of life, long enough that the presence of their cameras would no longer be disconcerting to their hosts, and long enough to form emotional bonds of trust that would increase the depth of the information offered to them and their cameras.

From an administrative perspective, placing students with a family had many advantages which have been long recognized in traditional anthropological field schools. The Maasai family I selected, several members of which I had known when I was a graduate student myself 30 years ago, could provide food, shelter and a range of daily activities useful for filming. I expected that placement with this particular family would provide my students with a safe environment, and
would be a good choice for other reasons as well, since many sons had been
drawn to urban migration as an alternative to cattle herding. Moreover, I knew
that the family had experienced difficulties: one of the sons, only a year before,
had died from complications of AIDS he had contracted as a migrant seeking
employment in Dar es Salaam. This fact would, I was sure, encourage the
members of the family support the production of an AIDS education film, and
would mean both men and women in the homestead would be highly aware of
the allures and dangers of urban migration – the new Maasai transhumance.

The difficulties that I sensed would make this homestead a “useful” case study
turned out in the event to be major crises. I realized, in the second season, that a
field school for applied anthropology is a field school that seeks out trouble. I
suppose statistically such a school is almost certain to bring students into contact
with crises and incumbent ethical problems. It was certainly a baptism of fire for
my students.

But I now turn to the benefits and beneficiaries of applied visual anthropology.

Beneficiaries of a field school: Students

Benefits of training the “whole person”

Not much is published about field schools in cultural anthropology, but many of
the first-person accounts and articles I found confirm that the experience has often
been responsible for a lifetime commitment to the culture area where the students
first worked and to their choice of anthropology as their profession.

The anthropological research needed for an applied / intervention film requires
makers to gain first hand ethnographic knowledge: their commitment to getting
this knowledge “right” is increased by its real world-consequences; makers of
intervention films in a field school are therefore highly motivated and work hard
to gain ethnographic knowledge in many areas: social problems that should be
targeted; problems likely to benefit from film intervention; film style appropriate
to the topic; and the design of effective screening events.

Given their artistic bent, students of visual anthropology often feel that their
aesthetic sensibilities are being blunted by the discipline’s constant training in
theory, logic, history and scientific method

but when artistic anthropology students find themselves in the field tasked with
making a film that confronts enormous social problems, they see not only the
need for their aesthetic sensibilities but their moral sense, their analytical and
strategic senses, and those aspects of the whole person that seek to integrate
diverse talents into a work of art and action
Benefits of training in documentary filmmaking –

Traditional field schools provide fundamental training for anthropological research; those for visual anthropologists can be designed to emphasize filmmaking. It is an art that takes years to master; but the process can be speeded up in the field because the sense of urgency and relevance motivates the quest for technical and aesthetic mastery. It is a great benefit.

Beneficiaries: Local collaborators on the production team

Local collaborators, often with university degrees, also benefit from a field school in visual anthropology. They gain advanced training in media making, intervention design, and skill in the facilitation of audience discussions.

Moreover, they are paid to do that which they may well have sought a university education for, to help their people.

Beneficiaries: Local people

Governmental representatives are often uninformed of minority people’s struggles, and intervention films can create awareness and sympathy in those whose positions in power can help indigenous people.

It is clear to me that intervention films have such decisive advantages over other educational media as to justify their comparatively high cost per viewer.

The indigenous intended audiences for our films are often excluded from national education campaigns because they are not fluent in the national language or are discriminated against for other reasons – they are therefore comparatively immune to mass educational campaigns, such as those concerning STDs.

Moreover, films provide a catalyst for the most consequential stage of social interventions: post-screening discussions place the need for social change in a context where individuals acknowledge publicly that their personal problems are wide-spread. It is an important to realize that the peer pressure which begins when an individual audience member speaks out shares important benefits with the change mechanisms at work in group psychotherapy.

Field school difficulties:

Let me turn briefly to a discussion of the difficulties experienced by field school participants. In the field, students are moved completely out of their comfort zones – everything becomes difficult – food, shelter, transportation, hygiene; the derangement of these factors causes as much culture shock as do the less tangible problems of losing sleep, missing friends, and lacking personal entertainments.

Baptism-of-Fire Ethics
Any field experience throws the student into a milieu in which difficult and unfamiliar ethical problems abound. The commitment to producing interventions in anthropology, however, almost certainly places the student in situations where the crises that called forth the intervention also call forth especially difficult ethical problems for the student.

In Tanzania we lived, worked and formed emotional attachments with families in deep crisis, seeking to know them well enough to produce honest biographies. The process led us to understand, for example, the brutality and impunity of the alcoholic patriarchs whose story we were telling, and the extent of the human and cattle diseases that were destroying not just their families but their whole society. Such realizations I have no doubt, were for all of us – crushing emotional events with pronounced ethical consequences. More than once I think we all felt that some of our hosts belonged in jail for the rest of their lives.

Conclusion – credibility, ethnographic triangulation and *Rashomon*

In 1961, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis published *Children of Sanchez*, the autoethnography of an impoverished family in Mexico City. The book became an instant best seller, and justly catapulted Lewis to fame.

The design of the book was simple. Over many months, Lewis tape recorded Sanchez’ four children describing different periods of the family’s history. Lewis assigned a chapter of the book to each period, and placed together each of the four children’s different versions of the same period.

The result was an amazing hodgepodge of contradictory reports. The children all recounted in shocking detail the abuses they experienced at the hands of their siblings and father, but denied, ignored or minimized discussion of - the wrongs attributed to them by the others their family.

In retrospect, I think this book did more than anything I’d read in leading me to a career in anthropology, perhaps even to my career in anthropology and filmmaking, because the book’s great strength comes from its audio recordings. *Children of Sanchez* is an ethnographic *Rashomon*. The reader is led by conflicting stories to triangulate an interpretation of events that is more objective than any of the accounts given by individual Sanchez children: multiple versions allow the reader to overcome distortions and omissions by identifying them as such. This, I believe, provides an excellent lesson in conducting ethnography and also in being alive. The dialecticians call the process *aufgehoben* – to incorporate and supersede what came before.

**Field School Design**

I have argued above the benefits of placing filmmaking field school students in the homes (or homesteads) of families. I want to conclude by describing another benefit of family residence for applied visual anthropology.

My three American students -- two men a woman -- were in their twenties; a Maasai woman served as their translator / collaborator. I hoped that gender segregated teams would be most successful at filming in the intensely gender-
segregated world of traditional Maasai. The fact that both teams were young allowed my male students access to the world of the warriors, while my female student and her partner were able to enter the world of young and middle-aged wives.

My plan was that Len and I, in a nearby homestead, would exploit our status as senior citizens in gaining access to filming the elders. We took advantage of the fact that Maasai discriminate favorably as much by age as they do by gender. The plan revolved on the knowledge that relationships between the ages and genders is fraught in Maasai, and the stories each group tells about the others do not usually connect. Seeing this dysfunction on film would prompt fascinating discussions.

Together, our three teams covered the vibrant universe of young Maasai men, the embattled foothold of girls and wives, and the dying planet of elders.

We created – as Oscar Lewis had done before – records that draw a triangulated perspective on Maasai life from the jarring disparities of age and gender, experience and viewpoint.

In the presentations that follow, four of my students, three of whom participated in the Maasai Migrants field school, discuss their own different perspectives on applied visual anthropology; Len Kamerling, who co-directed and co-taught the school with me last summer, concludes the panel with an historical overview of collaboration in visual anthropology. He moves us from his early work in Alaska to our present vision of film subjects and other collaborators in applied anthropological filmmaking.