

The field diary as a bridge between theory and practice

by ROSALIND YARDE

Marginalised youth

Fifty per cent of Tanzania's population is under the age of 18 years but they are rarely given a voice in society. All too often they are marginalised and disregarded, particularly in the context of social and economic development. While government, civil society and non-governmental organisations may advocate for empowerment, community engagement and social change, actually translating these aspirations into something tangible remains elusive. My Master's thesis in Communication for Development (Malmö University, Sweden) explored these ideas and how they might be promoted through a participatory media and communication framework.

My field work was conducted with a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) called Mkombozi, which provides services for children living on the streets in the towns of Moshi and Arusha in northern Tanzania. I worked with four young people – former street children – living in Mkombozi's residential centre, and gave them free rein to make a radio programme, backed by my technical expertise as a radio journalist. They chose the topics, agenda and radio formats, which ranged from storytelling to drama to interviews. The programme was broadcast on a regional radio station and the audience was invited to take part in a live discussion using the phone, text messages and email. A major objective was to see whether giving a voice to these young people would help strengthen Mkombozi's youth empowerment and community engagement agenda and thereby help to bring sustainable social change in the communities in which they lived.

Research approaches

Field notes: April 28th

....Kids now coming in. Looking a bit shy, apprehensive. They have put a bench by the window. A little way from me. Much lower to the ground than the chair I am sitting on. Others arriving now. They have to be persuaded to sit at the same table as me. Morgan's head is bowed. Godfrey, the youngest is looking at me, mystified. Some of them are looking away, some looking down. Unsmiling. I introduce myself. He, (Daddy Hassan), is explaining in Swahili what I am doing. (They're) Looking a bit worried and disengaged. Some of them looking away. Youngest looking at me. Suspicious? Unsure? Forgot to put recorder on. Done it now. Telling them that they choose what to put on the programme.

The first time I met the former street kids from Mkombozi, there was apprehension on both sides. I was to work with them for the next few weeks, helping them make the radio programme about the issues driving children to the streets. Mine was to be a dual role, as radio expert and also as researcher, observing and analysing the effectiveness of participatory radio as a tool for empowerment and community engagement.

April 28th

...I break the ice a bit by talking about football. Morgan is wearing a Manchester United Shirt. I ask him whether it's his team. He smiles and says yes. They seem surprised I should talk about football. Two of them are Man U fans (I think Charles is the other) Ezrom is Chelsea, Godfrey is Chelsea and Deo is Barcelona. It immediately breaks the ice. All English/European teams of course. Someone asks if I like football. I say I prefer rugby. After the football (talk) they revert to their previous blank positions. They listen.

Halloran (1998) warns us of the importance of not viewing any one research approach as 'sacred', since each has its own limitations. Therefore, rather than focus on one methodology, I used a variety of approaches similar to the 'methods toolbox' of ethnographic/participatory action research outlined by Tacchi et al (2003). These included policy and archive research, qualitative interviews, programme production and participant observation. The aim was to produce a rich variety of information that was aimed at eliciting deep meaning and understandings at different levels in a holistic study.

According to Cottle (1998), participant observation is highly challenging, involving a sustained and intensive period in the field and requiring the researcher to reflect upon, and adapt, his or her ideas and behaviour throughout the research process. It actually involves three different forms of data collection and skills: good observation; talking and interviewing; and discovering, retrieving and generating organisational documentation. The participant observer – or ethnographic action researcher, according to Tacchi et al (2003) – becomes his or her own research instrument, placing himself or herself in a position from which to make observations (data collection), and dependent on the practical skills of writing up field notes (Cottle, 1998).

This article explores one of the key data collection tools of participant observation, which proved to be invaluable during my research process – the field diary.

Making the visible indeed visible

The field diary, as Cottle notes (1998), is a vital data collection tool, generating a mass of details, information and general impressions that can be valuable for later analysis. It ‘records and makes the invisible visible’, by uncovering topics to explore what might otherwise have remained hidden. Sometimes what seems ordinary at the time takes on meaning later, so that there is a need for good descriptions of settings, scenes, people, events and inter-actions, including unexpected ones. An example was a chance meeting with a relative upon coming back from Mkombozi, which I noted down soon after.

Field Note: May 1

When I came back from seeing Godfrey, my husband’s niece and her husband were there. We had a brief conversation since they were leaving and I talked about some of the experiences of the boys at Mkombozi.... Carolin and her husband, both educated Tanzanians, seemed genuinely surprised about the issues I mentioned – family breakdown, poverty, education, abuse. I guess they are part of the ‘community’ and they seemed to be unaware. Both Godfrey and Morgan talked about the need to raise awareness. I guess this is the ‘community’ that should be engaged.

I made the note soon after the encounter, but at the time I was unaware of how I would use it. Later, when I began thinking about the concept of community, how Mkombozi wanted to engage with people within that community and the kind of information that they needed to know, I realised that this note would be useful. Had I not taken the opportunity to write about this chance encounter, the significance – and even the memory of it – may have been lost.

By ‘being there’ and noting the conversation, I had created an opportunity to explore and develop new avenues of research.

Field Notes: May 20th

I was waiting for Charles to turn up so we could do the editing. While I was in the office, a small group of boys from outside came in with a young boy who, it seems, they found on the street. The staff member sent him round to the back office so they could get some information about the boy and his family. Apparently this happens quite regularly but not as often as it used to because they are trying to break the perception that people can just leave children here, so Mkombozi, rather than the community, can solve their problems. The member of staff told me that sometimes they wonder if their presence in Moshi is having a negative influence in the community because it seems that being taken in by Mkombozi has almost become a life goal, like

a step towards getting an education. Sometimes families even bring their children because they think they'll get better opportunities here.

In previous interviews, this issue of people's overdependence on Mkombozi had been raised. However, being a witness and noting down this interaction made it more visible to me as researcher, and enabled me to follow up this line of investigation. Had I not consciously noted it in the field diary, I may not have followed up.

I would also suggest that the field diary can also make the 'visible' visible. Sometimes the detail is right in front of the researcher, but he or she may be too close to see it. On one level the diary functions like the 'record' and 'rewind' buttons on a digital recorder, allowing the researcher to go back, over data already gleaned but forgotten. On another level, the diary acts like the zoom of a camera, bringing into focus detail -and its significance- that otherwise could easily be missed.

Layers of meaning

Tufte and Mefalopulos underline the importance of uncovering the multiple layers of meaning that may be discovered in the participatory process (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009; Tufte et al, 2008). The field diary can help the researcher expose those multiple layers as it serves a variety of functions at different stages of the research – from recording, to interpretation, to analysis and reflection.

At my first meeting with the boys who would be making the radio programme, I was aware of the need to observe the settings, scenes and interactions (Cottle, 1998; Tacchi, 2003) and write notes either contemporaneously or soon after to avoid memory dropout. Cottle suggests that a useful start is observation of the basic spatial, temporal and hierarchical infrastructure, which is why in my diary entry of April 28 I noted the positions of the table, chairs and bench and where the children sat. Although field notes should aim principally to record basic data and not to comment or rush to make wider interpretations or theoretical connections (Cottle, 1998), the process of recording inevitably stimulates critical comments and questions for further thought and later analysis. Tacchi (2003) says that analysis should be a continuous part of the research, not something you do after the fieldwork is over. She suggests that some time should be spent each day reading and thinking through the material in order to see what interesting and significant issues are emerging; to develop ideas and interpretations that can be pursued through further research; and to explore ideas across all the different kinds of material that is being gathered. In this kind of analysis, the researcher is normally looking for common themes, ideas, issues or questions that are emerging across the research methods.

In practice, I found it difficult to confine even contemporaneous note-taking to simple data recording, since the action of self-consciously noting the physical position the children placed themselves in –on benches lower than me and away from me– immediately confirmed what I had already gleaned from other conversations and interviews –that children occupy a lowly hierarchical status in Tanzanian society. It also made me aware of their perception of me as researcher, occupying a ‘higher status’ position. I may not have noticed the significance of the placing of the benches had I not self-consciously set out to observe and record the scene. Had I not read over my notes, I then may have missed changes that began to occur in the relationship between the participants of the radio project and myself as researcher during the process of making the radio programme.

Measuring change

The recording of detailed observations can also serve as useful evidence for comparative analysis, to ‘measure’ the impact of a process, such as significant changes in behaviour. As noted above, in my first encounter with the boys, there was apprehension on both sides. The boys barely looked at me, communicating with their heads bowed or through the interpreter, Daddy Hassan. As the weeks went on, I noticed that their confidence grew as they became more relaxed working with me. At the point of making my initial observations, I was, of course, unaware of how the process would unfurl. But looking back on my notes, it was clear that there had been change. The notes provided the ‘evidence’ to back up my assertion that the participatory process had elicited some small change in their confidence levels. Five or six weeks after making my initial observations, I realised that some of the hierarchical barriers that characterised our first encounter had shifted:

Field notes May 12th

...This time we were without an interpreter and we managed the session quite smoothly with a mix of English and Swahili. I notice that they are much more relaxed with me now. They gave me the traditional Shikamoo greeting (which always makes me feel old) but Charles, rather than shaking my hand put his fist together with mine and gave a ‘street’ greeting. I noticed as well that they were talking to me directly and calling me by my first name (which is unusual for Tanzanian children/young people although maybe it’s because I’m a foreigner)... In previous sessions they didn’t really speak to me directly but would usually address their questions to ‘Teacher’, as they call Daddy Hassan, or whoever was sitting in...

Often, the significance of observations may hit the researcher after writing and reading back a field note. In this way, the note itself becomes part of the ‘evidence’

that can be used in subsequent analysis. At the first meeting with the children, for instance, I noted how initially they were non-communicative, but became interested when I asked them their opinions. During the writing phase, I was then able to include the observation and the analysis: "The most striking observation in this note is, 'It's then when you ask them what they think, that they register the first stirrings of interest.' Apart from the animation that arose from the football discussion, these five young people were largely non-communicative. The fact that they responded to my asking them what they thought, suggests that this was an unusual request. How often are young people asked what they think?" (Yarde, 2010).

Bridging theory and practice

As the research process progresses, the field diary can act as a bridge between theory and practice, allowing the researcher to use the data recorded as evidence to prove or disprove a theory, and bringing such theory to life for both the researcher and the reader. My overall research approach was an abductive one. This is a 'twin track' approach whereby on one track existing theory is taken as a starting point, which is either verified or falsified by empirical data. On the other track, the empirical data is taken as a starting point, and used to verify or falsify existing theories (Schroeder et al, 2003). As researcher and participant, I switched between each track, combining both processes.

For instance, one of the key conceptual issues I was exploring was the question of voice and empowerment. It is easy to make the statement that giving young people a voice is empowering, but finding the evidence to back this up may be problematic. One entry in my field diary added to the body of evidence backing up theories about voice, and also linked into other related theories on empowerment:

Field Notes: April 28 cont.

...I held up the recorder and said, So do you want to have a go? and they looked in disbelief. Then they smile and Deo gets up and moves across to Charles. Takes the mike and immediately starts speaking, like a radio presentation.

He's good. Confident.

Suddenly they come out of themselves. Very outgoing. Laughing.

It was as if they were completely different people. Deo put himself in role of the presenter, his voice raised, he projected, he was performing. Everyone was laughing.

.....When I went to play back the recording there was a problem and we couldn't hear it properly. It was as if someone had punctured a balloon. The life went out of them.

They were disappointed. I was talking about bringing speakers. I had just put the

recorder on the wrong setting. But I guess this says something about wanting to hear themselves.

This entry opened the way for further thoughts about the significance of what had happened. Their joy at being allowed to use the equipment could be interpreted on two levels. First, it reinforced the idea that the ‘normal’ relationship between children and adults and between the external agency and the beneficiaries is normally an unequal one. Second, it suggested that the difference between this intervention and previous ones was the question of ‘ownership’. Their subsequent disappointment and deflation at not being able to hear the playback properly underlined the importance for them of having a voice. It was not only important for them to be able to take part in being creative, expressing their views and recording their voices -they needed to *hear* their own voices, almost to reaffirm that they had actually produced something of merit.

The diary is also a space that allows the researcher to ‘think out loud’ or develop new theories, without necessarily having to come to firm conclusions at that particular time.

Field Notes: May 1

I have been thinking about the question of empowerment. Godfrey has been with Mkombozi for one year. He seems not as confident as the others. (I steered the conversation away from his running away from home to rapping because he seemed like he could get upset). But then Morgan has been there for many years. Yet Godfrey has ambition and has learnt to express himself through rap and music. Is that what we mean by empowerment?

This movement from theory to grassroots evidence and back to theory again has been likened to putting a mask on and taking it off. One moment we see from a distance through the eyes of the researcher/theorist; the next we move close up to the grassroots through the vehicle of the field diary, as the theory is translated into reality.

Self-reflection

The field diary can also be a good vehicle for self-reflection. One of my lines of investigation concerned the notion of grassroots participation and dialogue, as opposed to top down, didactic programme making. In the past I had worked on a radio project where the producers were firmly in control. In this experiment I set out to break down some of the traditional barriers between the technical experts producing radio content and the ‘beneficiaries’, but as I wrote my entries in the field diary I began to question my own role as researcher.

Field Note: April 30th

Interview with Godfrey

....He's still looking very worried.

(He's) asking me what I am going to do with the information from him and the others....

I think maybe I should have been more sensitive. I didn't launch straight into how he got on the street, talked about education but all throughout he seemed nervous and apprehensive. Less assured than the others. That's why I switched to talking about rapping. Was trying to find something he connected with. He relaxed slightly but still worried posture.... I wonder if I am being voyeuristic. I ask about probably the most painful period of their lives as if they were subjects under examination. I need to be careful of my attitude. I try not to appear to pity them. I actually don't.

Having a space to reflect on my own role enabled me to change my approach when necessary – as was the case when dealing with the younger children – but also to appreciate when I needed to loosen the reins of control. Reflecting on situations helped me to understand what the participatory process was about. As shown below, I learnt an important lesson during the programme editing process.

Field Note: May 15th 2010

Today I went to Mkombozi to mix the drama we had recorded on Wednesday.

*Yesterday I edited the scenes and began thinking about sound effects. I had assumed that I would do the editing as it would be faster and at home I got quite carried away because I had forgotten how good it is to create something for radio. I recorded the rain and some barking dogs and found some BBC archive of chickens. I spent hours doing this – I was unconscious of the time and went to bed at about 1.30am. As it happens, quite fortuitously as it turns out, I didn't save the sound effects properly last night so they had to be done again with them at Mkombozi. **In effect I handed back the 'power' to them and I think this deepened their attachment to what they had created.** They really got into it and were in deep and lengthy discussions about what sounds to use and where. **What is telling is that they chose to use the sounds differently to how I had done the night before.** They really paid attention to detail and replayed scenes over and over. There was one scene where they spotted a mistake in the dialogue which they insisted on correcting. Because the editing was proving difficult they decided to record the whole scene again. They worked very well together, discussing, revising, experimenting and were quite passionate about the finished product. My role was to simply follow their directions. This may be the relationship one should aim at in a participatory programme where the so-called expert is on the project. ie the expert should act as facilitator, not 'controller'. There*

is a strong desire to take over but I have managed to quell this and the result is a finished product which they 'own'.

Field diary as content

Reading back my notes after each session, I began to realise not only the significance of the diary for self-reflection but also the fact that the content was gripping in its own right. Theory, by definition, is rather dry and lifeless. My observations brought the theory to life by giving the reader a rich insight into the milieu. Rather than use the field diary for data analysis only, I therefore decided to use it as part of the content of the written thesis to give flavour and reality to the ideas I was exploring and also to give a sense of the thought processes I was experiencing as researcher.

Field Notes: May 1

I see that these boys are not typical of their age. Their experiences on the street of course and the hardships have affected them. But that is probably true of many young people here who struggle on a daily basis with poverty, conflict and abuse and who remain hidden in society. But there is also something else that distinguishes them: Mkombozi, I think, is teaching these boys to recognise their experience and to express themselves. (question – is up to an agency to do this? Are they in a way being 'conditioned'? Is that bad anyway?) This may not be actively done but may be a result of having a safe space and freedom to discuss, perform, play. Be listened to. Including descriptions of places and people helped to paint a picture of the environment in which the research was taking place and even added a touch of humour in places.

Field Note: May 13th

.....I was surprised that the passers-by were so responsive. Tanzanians generally seem so passive, accepting anything their government throws up at them, I thought, unquestioningly. But I found that they had a lot to say in front of the mike.. There was one woman Deo stopped. She was carrying green bananas on her head in a plastic bucket. She agreed to be interviewed but said that she didn't have much time as she was late. So Deo was quick but after he ended the interview she carried on talking. She wouldn't stop talking and he had to keep resuming the interview. She was getting more and more passionate as she spoke. She said she was a teacher and that we should go to her school and do some interviews with the girls there so that they could understand how strong they really are!

The interview referred to in the above field note was not used in the programme, because the interviewee was rather unfocussed and did not really answer the interviewer's questions. However, the field note was included in the written thesis on

which this article is based, because it was a rather amusing and telling interchange: the interviewee had first said she did not have time, but then continued to talk despite Deo's efforts to end the interview, even grabbing the microphone at one point.

By incorporating field diary notes into the write-up, a new dimension can be created that moves the focus, as if it was a camera lens, from close up to wide view to close up again, giving a rich insight into the milieu and opening up new possibilities for analysis and future research.

Methodological blind spots

As noted above, participant observation was one of a range of approaches that I used in my research project. While the field diary was a vital tool at all stages of the research process, it is important to note that it should not be relied on as a sole data collection and analytical tool. Tacchi (2003) suggests that the field diary can be used to understand a specific place and context in detail through the production of knowledge using a self-aware method but she also stresses the need for a methodological 'toolbox' approach. Participant observation is less strictly linear or predictable because of its reflexive approach, and therefore its findings, while providing a rich insight and even empirical evidence, may not fit neatly into a logical research analysis (Cottle, 1998). What is required is a range of indicators, of which the field diary is one (Tufté and Mefalopulos, 2009; Tufté et al, 2008).

While acknowledging the need for a range of methodological approaches, it is as well to play to the strengths of the field diary, recognising its capacity to not only evoke a complex picture at the grassroots and expose multiple layers of meaning but also to give voice to both researcher and participant.

Field note: May 13th

(Deo) I enjoyed this interview because in my future I want to interview people so when I interview people and they talk with me good and smile and I get the confidence to ask people questions I feel so proud because I want to be.....a journalist like you. So when I do it I feel so good. I think I don't waste my time. I do something which I want to do some day. But today I do. I feel so good. Thanks.

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