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Title: Video Diaries: a discussion of their use for researching the Learner Experience in Higher Education

Abstract:

This paper considers the rationale for using video diaries as a method of qualitative data gathering for research into students' experiences of Higher Education (HE). In particular the paper considers how video diaries have been employed for researching students' views and attitudes to their own learning and development. The paper examines the literature on the purpose of reflective video diary research as the method has moved beyond its initial primary development for use in medical studies and specifically into their use in HE.

The particular benefits of personal video-diary compilation are considered in terms of the autonomy of the participant for choosing the location and time of recording along with the immediacy of the learner's reflections. These benefits are compared with other qualitative data gathering methods in particular the use of semi-structured interviews in the presence of an interviewer. The high volume of data gathered through video diaries and the administrative load for data management and its analysis are the main negative aspects considered.

A methodology for employing video diaries as a research method for data collection is discussed within the context of three case studies with undergraduate students at a UK university and the wider recent literature. The conclusions highlight the unique value of participant-generated video diaries for researching the nature of the student learning experience in HE.

Keywords: video diaries, qualitative methods, learners' experiences, reflection on learning,

1. Introduction

Keeping a diary as a written record for reflecting on daily life and a summary of personal activity has been used for centuries since writing became a widespread skill, with historical examples in Arabic preceding the 10th century. Many diaries were originally composed for private use but some have subsequently entered the public domain, from the example of Samuel Pepys, diarist and civil servant, at the time of the Great Fire of London in 1666 to the 21st century concept of an online diary or blog, which is primarily intended for sharing personal views in the public domain of the internet. This view accords with the dictionary definition of a diary as: '*A daily record of events or transactions; specifically, a daily record of matters affecting the writer personally.*' (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2015). While diaries have offered a particular view of daily life from the writer's standpoint, they can often provide a historical record of personal observations with the example of Anne Frank's wartime diary from 1941, and thus offer an alternative view from public historical documents intended to preserve government policy and decision making.

'Video diaries' or, '*participant-generated audio-visual accounts*' (Rich & Patashnick 2002:247) have been used as a valued data resource in qualitative research because they provide a more direct understanding of participants' experiences than is afforded by data gathering which may be controlled by the researcher (Rich & Patashnick,2002:249; Riddle & Arnold,2007;Conole et al.,2006). The compilation of diaries to support learner experience research provides an opportunity via the diary format for reflection on day by day learning activities as experienced and undertaken by HE students, (see for example Schön, 1987 and SQA, 2015).

2. A review of the literature from early video diary studies

Using the qualitative data gathering approach of video diaries for researching students' personal experiences has grown in popularity in recent years as technology has become more easily accessible and usable by non-technically inclined participants (as noted by Jefferies & Hardy, 2010). The notion of video recorded reflections has been popularised on European reality television programmes, such as Big Brother, where a video room is made available to participants to share their immediate reactions and thoughts about their fellow contestants.

Prior to 2006 research carried out into the use of video diaries was largely confined to medical research programmes designed to examine the long term use of patient controlled drugs such as for asthma (Antoniou, 2003). An early articulate example of medical research using video diaries was the work of Rich and Patashnik (2002) into Video Intervention /Prevention Assessment (VIA). In a study considering the point of view of adolescent patients administering their own drugs to control chronic disease, they set out to consider the treatment from the patient's perspective. They highlighted the fact that few investigations into audio-visual use had removed the researcher from the frame and handed over the recording media to the patient.

'The established approach to medical research and care is from the 'etic' perspective of the clinician, who learns about disease by studying it from outside. VIA investigates health issues from the 'emic' (Spradley, 1979) perspective of the patient, who knows disease through the experience of living with it.' (2002:246)

The importance for the research studies described below was that they independently accorded with Rich and Patashnik's (2002) justifications into using an 'outside in' perspective where the participant takes control of when and where they record so that they are not tied to recording their reflections solely when a researcher is present.

Rich et al. (2000) have suggested that video diaries provided *'a more direct understanding of people . . . than may be afforded by data collected and controlled solely by the researcher'* (2000:156). This comment was contested by Gibson (2005) in her research into patients with Duchenne syndrome. She asserted that the researcher still has a hand as the 'absent' researcher when she claimed that whether the researcher is present or absent, the fact that they have handed the participants a video camera implies complicity in the process of their recordings. *'...I argue that... personal video accounts are socially located constructions that are produced in response to a specific research context.'* Gibson who pursues a Bourdieusian stance further suggested that *'the researcher, whether physically present or not, is inevitably part of the research world being studied'* (2005:8)

While this stance may be justified for the medical research field where Gibson and Rich and team were working, the issue of the place of the researcher within educational research is somewhat different as outlined through Noyes' reflections (2004) below. When the educational researcher provides audio-visual facilities to a student there is less intimacy with their experience than in the arena of disease and health management. It remains important that the researcher acknowledges their place in the research domain and considers their relationship with the diarists which in education may be one of unequal authority.

Noyes (2004) was one of the earliest educational researchers to consider the use of video diaries as a means of data capture for research. Describing video-diaries as *'an innovative method for qualitative research in education'* (2004:193), Noyes considered the potential negative impact of the power factor in his research with children transferring from primary to secondary schools and thus deliberately removed the researcher from the data gathering environment. He achieved this by using video rooms where children went to make recordings whenever they felt they had something to say. Noyes' prior research used observations and semi-structured interviews to understand how the children felt about the transition from

primary school to secondary school. Due to a perceived '*initial lack of rapport*' and the '*unequal status*' he believed there was between himself and the children, Noyes promoted the use of video diaries as a data gathering method which allowed the children to talk more freely. This decision to hand responsibility for the recording process to the diary participants pervades the later studies associated with HE research discussed below.

3. A review of audio-visual reflective studies to research HE students' experience

In the UK the first in a series of HE studies using reflective diaries in their research methodology was initiated in 2006 by the Jisc Learners' Experiences of E-learning Programme. Phase 1 funded research projects were undertaken across four UK universities by a team from the Open University (Conole et al, 2006), while another study at Glasgow Caledonian University (Creanor et al., 2006) explored a variety of students' reflections on their HE learning experiences. These studies mainly included audio reflections as their means of data collection to enquire into students' learning experiences. Around the same time a team of researchers at the University of Hertfordshire was exploring student experiences of campus life with the use of hand held camcorders lent to students (Quadri et al., 2007). This research project was called 'Seven Days in the Life of a Student', henceforth referred to as Seven Days. The initial explorations of data gathering and analysis using student reflective diaries by this team then informed the development of a video diary methodology for a further project funded by Phase 2 of the Jisc Learners' Experiences of E-learning Programme. The Student Reflections On Lifelong e-Learning (STROLL) project (Jefferies et al, 2009) commenced in April 2007 and undertook a 21 month longitudinal investigation into how HE students used technology for supporting their learning, across up to three academic years of the participants' experiences. The results from the STROLL video diaries project would offer the first long-term insight into how campus-based students in HE were choosing and using

technologies to support their learning. In the meantime, Riddle and Arnold developed their Day Experience Method (DEM) for short-term student diaries. This was undertaken at the University of Cambridge from mid-2007 and used a mixed media approach with audio recorders, pen and notebook and single use cameras to capture learner experiences.

Further examples of formative longitudinal studies which employed video diaries, include 'First Year Experiences of Students' at the University of Leicester with Biosciences students, commencing in October 2007 (Cashmore et al., 2010, Cashmore et al., 2012) and an extended research project with video diaries into the experiences of first-time distance learners in New Zealand and Australia (Brown et al., 2012, Brown et al., 2013). With funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, Andrews and Tynan investigated the overall distance learner experience and student choice of technology for learning at five Australian universities (Andrews & Tynan, 2012, Andrews et al., 2011). The early research, that is with the exception of the 2011 study by Brown and his team and Andrews and Tynan's study, all originated prior to 2010 in an age before smartphones and VOIP (such as Skype), which would subsequently offer high quality cameras and recording via widespread personal access to technology.

The media used for the studies varied from single use cameras (Riddle & Arnold), camcorders (Seven Days, STROLL), to webcams (Conole & Thorpe, 2007; Brown et al., 2012; Andrews and Tynan, 2012; Cashmore et al., 2010; STROLL, 2009). Audio recorders were used in the 2006 studies and to supplement video recordings as well as or for those participants who found video inaccessible through disability (STROLL, 2009) or were too timid to use them. Table 1 below provides a summary of each of the research projects which used reflective audio-visual diaries to research the HE student experience.

Table 1 A chronology of video and audio diary research studies 2005-2013

Main Author(s)	Date of Study	Title of Study	Main research focus/question	Participants and country of study
Conole G. DeLaat, M. Dhillon, T. Darby, J.	2005-2006 1 year	Jisc LXP Student experiences of technologies	How do learners engage with and experience e-learning?	HE students across 4 sites in the UK
Creanor, L. Trinder, K. Gowan, D. Howells, C.	2005-2006 1 year	Jisc LEX The Learner's Voice	What are learners' current experiences and expectations of e-learning?	Further, Higher, Adult, Community and Work-based learning students, UK
Quadri, N. Jefferies, A. Bullen, P.	2006 3 months	Seven Days in the Life of a Student	A snapshot of technologies used by undergraduate students over one week.	HE campus-based students, UK
Riddle, M. Arnold, M.	2007 3 months	The day experience method (DEM) for the Learning Landscape Project	How do reflective diaries provide an informal view of people's daily lives?	HE students, UK
Jefferies, A Bullen, P Hyde, R.	2007-2009 2 years	Jisc: Student reflections on Lifelong e-Learning (STROLL)	How does students' use of technology to support their learning change over time?	HE students, UK
Cashmore, A. Green, P. Scott, J	2007-2010 3 years	Student experience of university life	What is the lived experience of students across the university?	First year HE campus-based students, UK
Andrews, T. Tynan, B. James, R.	2011-2013 2 years	Learners' use of new media in distance teaching and learning	The distance learner's voice in relationship to their "lived experiences" of information and communication technologies (ICTs),	HE distance learners, Australia
Jefferies, A. Cubric, M.	2011-2012 1 year	Evaluating Electronic Voting Systems (EEVS)	Students' reflections on the use of a specific learning technology	HE campus-based students, UK
Brown, M., Keppell, M. Hughes, H. Hard, N. Shillington, S. Smith, L	2012-2013 1 year	The experiences of first-time distance learners	The experience of first-time distance learners with online learning	Mature learners new to distance learning, New Zealand

In the HE studies described above all the participants were adults and they participated as volunteers and representatives of the wider student group. They were included precisely because they typified the normal student experience instead of being the subjects of a

specialised research group which was small-scale, exclusive and naturally narrow in focus as noted above with the examples from medical research studies.

The third and final video diary case study in the research reported here was undertaken by the author, in addition to Seven Days and STROLL. The Evaluating Electronic Voting Systems (EEVS) case study (Jefferies & Cubric, 2012) used video diaries as one of several data-gathering methods to extract student opinion for evaluating electronic voting systems as an assessment method. Undertaken several years after the previous studies during the 2011-2012 academic year, EEVS made use of students' personal (and ubiquitous) smartphones for recording their experiences although webcams were also an option. The participants then uploaded their recordings to a secure online site.

Table 2 below summarises the details and chronology of the three case studies and their distinguishing features.

Table 2 Description of the three video-diary research case studies at the University of Hertfordshire

Title of Study and Dates	Research Funding Source	Principal features	Participant details
Seven Days in the Life of a Student 2006	Blended Learning Unit – a HEFCE funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Hertfordshire	Students were loaned camcorders to record their daily study lives during a week in May 2006	10 undergraduate volunteers from across the Schools of the University
STROLL - Student reflections On Lifelong e-Learning 2007-2009	Jisc Learners' Experiences of E-Learning Programme Phase 2	Up to 4 iterations of their week long reflective diaries recorded at 6 monthly intervals over 21 months from June 2007.	54 HE campus-based undergraduate students
EEVS - Evaluating	Jisc Assessment and	Weekly reflections	11 undergraduate

Electronic Voting Systems 2011-2012	Feedback Programme, Strand B	from students on how technology was used in class to support their learning experiences	students used qualitative video diary reflections alongside a range of quantitative data gathering methods
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4. Methodology: Developing a robust data gathering and analysis process for video diaries

Developing the methodology for video diary analysis by the HE projects mentioned above shows an expected similarity in approach. In summary they all required agreement on the provision of accessible and good quality media for recording, which was without cost to the participants; acceptable ethical procedures; and comprehensive data-analysis processes.

Audio-visual recording equipment was provided in the earlier studies as described above; the later studies typically reported greater ownership of phones and personal webcams for recording diaries. From a practical point of view recording media was normally lent out to students during each recording period after which the data and media were retrieved. Seven Days used camcorders for a week with a small group of volunteers but the larger longitudinal studies frequently lent webcams on a long-term basis to participants. A request by students on the STROLL project to use their own mobile phones, pre-2010 resulted in poor quality recordings so this was discouraged. Tutors were available across all the HE research projects to support students not confident with the technology, to answer their questions and to help with any set up required. For STROLL a private recording area with a university-owned PC was set up for those without access to personally owned computers, still a potential barrier for participants in 2007 (Sharpe et al., 2009:10).

Early in the research design the legal and ethical implications of studies using video material and the procedures for secure holding and access of diarists' recordings were considered. The

approach typically included the design of data release and permission forms to be signed by all the participants prior to any of their reflections being collected. This is in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines which emphasise informed consent, the right of participants to withdraw and an awareness of possible detriment arising from participation in research, privacy, and disclosure.

A comprehensive procedure for secure storage of data is required and this extended beyond the data gathering and the analysis stages to the longer term storage of data for a further agreed period of time according to any project funding rules. The procedures typically comprised password protected access to a secure computer server for soft copies and a locked cupboard in a secure location for hard copies of tapes, CDs and memory sticks.

Each longitudinal study contacted the student to maintain regular involvement during the recording periods in different ways. Cashmore et al. (2010) sent text and email reminders at irregular intervals during the recording dates. The STROLL team provided sets of daily postcards for use during the recording weeks (students recorded their reflections a week at a time at approximately six monthly intervals) supplemented by personal text messages to remind them to record regularly. The EEVS project (Jefferies & Cubric, 2012) sent weekly emails to the student participants to remind them to record their reflections regularly and to upload them to a secure location on the LMS when recordings were completed.

Table 3 gives a step by step review of the process developed by the STROLL research team (revised from Jefferies et al, 2009) for the analysis of data as an exemplar of a robust methodology for analysing and checking data accuracy in audio-visual research. Data analysis for Seven Days was undertaken manually since there was a small group of students (n=10) with a limited set of data. EEVS used narrative analysis because of the project's focus on a small set of themes and a similar number of participants (n=11) to Seven Days.

STROLL's iterative longitudinal process where participants (n=54) recorded up to 4 diaries

at six month intervals over 21 months had a much larger set of data for analysis. As indicated in Table 3 a variety of tools were used including the NVivo™ software programme for textual analysis following an initial manual transcript and overview. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss further the full set of possibilities for qualitative data analysis but the author notes that more recent technical tools may significantly speed up the process of managing the data and now offer different approaches to analysing it.

All the projects that commented on the analysis process mentioned their surprise that the total assembled amount of data from the diaries was much greater than initially anticipated and that the time taken for detailed analysis should not be underestimated. *‘It is worth noting that you will have quite a large number of data points to analyse even with a relatively small cohort,’* Riddle and Arnold (2007:2).

Table 3 A process for detailed analysis of video diaries developed from the STROLL project

Action	Rationale	Outcome
1. Video diary compiled by student, submitted and then watched by researcher	Check content is relevant and technology has worked and student has given relevant answers	Initial understanding of answers to free-flow questions
2. Compile transcript using e.g. Dragon Dictate™ in Word™.	To ensure a checkable transcript which can be used for comparison with others	Set of student transcripts from their diaries over 18 month period
3. Check transcript against original recording and revise as necessary	Ensure all extras and possible vagaries have been accounted for	Set of reliable student transcripts from their diaries over 18 month period
4. Highlight student words in transcript in colour and construct a concept map for the student diary using their own words	2 nd stage review to become familiar with the material in the individual diary and to cluster it into sections according to phrases used	Set of colour coded transcripts and explanatory mind maps showing initial data analysis
5. Upload transcript into NVivo™ and check and then code data into nodes according to broad research questions	The use of NVivo™, to speed up data analysis themes from the full set of transcribed materials	The students’ comments are now easily searchable and can be viewed and compared electronically as necessary Further mind maps were created from the NVivo™

		queries
6. NVivo™ data analysis sampled by independent researcher to ensure accuracy of coding	Inter-rater reliability is used to ensure that the researcher(s) has not incorrectly ascribed meaning to the data nor ignored potentially useful information	Agreement that samples of the NVivo™ coding had been completed accurately.

In each study it was essential that the participants, all volunteers, continued to engage during the lifecycle of the project and that the time they allocated to participate was acknowledged. The rewarding of participants was not seen as impacting the impartiality of the data provided and was typically a gift of Amazon vouchers or similar (Seven Days, STROLL and EEVS).

Are video-diary research projects more likely to gain volunteers only from those participants with a particular technological inclination? Can the researcher assume that for all participants the use of audio-visual technologies such as a webcam, camcorder or digital voice recorder is ubiquitous and so much part of their everyday life that they will record whenever and wherever they are? All the projects examined above sought to offer a level playing field in terms of providing personal support and easy access to the technology to record the diaries. The technology playing field has shifted dramatically since the early video diaries were being tested as a serious research method in 2006, but technical support needed to be readily available, as explained above for STROLL, with extra effort made to encourage the participation of mature and older learners (Conole & Thorpe, 2007) and those with physical disabilities (Jefferies & Hyde, 2009).

5. The multi-dimensional aspect of video-diaries as a research method

Video diaries offer the researcher a multi-dimensional approach to the participant's experience, as noted by Emmison, writing on the use of visual data in 'Qualitative Research,

theory method and practice' (Silverman, 2004, chapter 13). It is this multi-dimensionality which means the diaries offer a set of different perspectives from other qualitative data gathering methods including semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Audio-visual data provides sound, action and an environment (comprising a foreground and background), resulting in multiple dimensions for the researcher to consider and an associated increase in the complexity of the data analysis. The recording location in the studies described above was chosen by the participant. This allowed them to take an active role in contributing their reflections instead of the role of a passive interviewee. Thus the research design avoids issues which arise in semi-structured interviews where the researcher chooses time, place and length of the interaction and where the design of the environment could offer the potential for power differentiation between the researcher and the participant, cf. Noyes' 2004 study described above. The deliberate choice taken by the researchers for the Seven Days research (Quadri et al., 2007) was for the participants to decide where they would record and the nature of the content, since their brief was deliberately phrased into a broad description of recording their daily study life over the period of a week. For their diary recordings, the Seven Days participants, unfettered by the use of a static video room and using lightweight camcorders, chose to record all around their personal studying and working environments. This included reflections recorded while they were traveling on the bus and in the kitchen preparing meals. As noted with the Riddle and Arnold study (2007) the purposeful lack of direction afforded to the student participants as to when and what they should record offered a wider visual insight into the participant's daily activity. In the discussion on the methodology above however, the negative impact of the researchers being less directive in the content of the recordings was the unexpectedly large amounts of irrelevant comments in the data. This required time-consuming analysis for teasing out the full range of themes and the value of the content.

The extra value of the freedom to record where and when they chose resulted in unanticipated ethnographical insights into the participants' choice of location and timing. For the STROLL participants, the students' chosen location for recording their video diaries was typically a quiet personal place such as their own study or bedroom which formed the backdrop of the webcam recordings. The STROLL case study took a more tightly scaffolded approach for content than the Seven Days study and provided daily questions for directing reflection; participants were invited to record regularly morning and evening. The HE video diary studies referred to above had not expressed the intention of being primarily ethnographical studies, apart from Cashmore (2010), but the choice of location by participants led to additional opportunities to see them in their preferred recording environment. Further analysis of the breadth of ethnography in audio-visual diary studies is beyond the scope of the current paper.

6. The use of video diaries as a research method

Three principal reasons are proposed for the benefit of using reflective video diaries in educational research. These include firstly, the opportunities for immediate reflection supported by further learner led reflection. Immediacy offers spontaneity in reflection on events with the additional benefit of a diary for the subsequent reflection offered. This can continue to build on the initial views expressed and either negate or confirm them. The single interview data capture offers a sole opportunity for the interviewer and interviewee to discuss questions, whereas diaries offer a longer elapsed time for reflection. The diaries for Seven Days and STROLL and other studies (Cashmore; Andrews and Tynan; Brown et al.) generally required regular, at least daily input.

Students now entering HE belong to a generation that has been encouraged to become more reflective in their approach to their studies and to seek to develop a mindful approach (The Oxford Student, 2012). It has not always been so, despite the earlier work of Habermas (Habermas and Shapiro, 1971), Boud (Boud et al., 1985) and Schön (Schön, 1987), *inter alia* to encourage a reflective approach among learners, researchers could not rely on learners being previously schooled or encouraged in reflection. Analysis of the diaries in Seven Days and the early STROLL studies indicated many random and disconnected comments which displayed an absence of thoughtful reflection. Of course the diary medium does not guarantee high quality longitudinal reflection but it offers greater opportunity to build on initial impressions and reflections. An apparent inability by participants to focus their reflection does not negate the use of video diaries, but it did lead to the choice of an increasingly guided approach for data gathering in the STROLL and EEVS projects. This included guidance to participants to describe in fuller detail what and how they had been learning and specific daily questions to answer (see STROLL, 2009). A directive focus for the participants was also included in the studies by Andrews and Tynan (2012) and Brown et al., (2013).

Secondly, the reason for using video to record the participants' reflections means that the immediacy of response is captured by the technology as a silent non-responsive partner, managed by the participant. They were not required to compose their responses, as with a written diary nor to articulate a timely answer in an interview but to talk through their reflections. In addition to the STROLL material, this is also evidenced in Brown's videos of the HE participants, who would record chatty and informal monologues. In the author's experience the most valuable responses were those which showed ongoing reflection; this built into a narrative in a way that would have been impossible to capture at interview or in a single recording,

Thirdly, video diaries offer reflection without the presence of an interviewer. In the early medical and primary school research undertaken into video diary use mentioned above, the presence of an interviewer was considered as a negative intrusion on the participants (Rich et al, 2000; Noyes, 2004). Depending on their age, background and subject, the participants may be inclined to say what they think the interviewer wanted to hear. Removing the interviewer/researcher from the process of the recording allowed the participant to reflect freely. This compares with the alternative data collection options of a semi-structured interview, where the interviewer is physically present in the same room and for a set time during a recorded interview, requiring a response from the interviewee to questions within a relatively short time frame. The absence of an interviewer from the recordings and thus from the time and the space and the location of the recordings removes potential stress for the interviewee as well as removing the interviewer's potential for influencing the responses by their verbal or non-verbal contributions. The point here is that the use of learners' reflective video diaries for data capture is not, by and large, an intrusion into their space and does not bring the 'absent' researcher into their diary recording environment, (Gibson, 2003).

The need to avoid a potential power imbalance was however, not the original reason for adopting the video-diary method for the HE research projects. The prime motive was an opportunity to gather longitudinal data from participants, facilitated by technologies previously unavailable and which was otherwise unobtainable from the researcher's office or laboratory. The outcomes of the projects have all indicated the richness of the video-diary data and the unique insight they offer to the participants' views, environment and experiences.

7. Conclusions

The aim of each of the HE video-diary studies discussed above was to encourage reflection from the participants and provide a longitudinal view of their experiences. The research

outputs included many serendipitous comments supporting this view. Some participants were remarkably open in their reflections, such as this example from a student reflecting on the process of recording his video diary stated:

...this week it has really enlightened me [sic] that I am very, very highly dependent on the internet and networks that the university runs. (Jefferies et al, 2009:126)

The goals and subsequent outputs of video-diary research in HE should be considered in terms of the impact of the research on future practice. The studies have differed in focus but the learners' reflections in their chosen personal spaces and the content of their diaries provide a rich and unique source of data to inform future engagement with HE participants. The prime research interest and the enduring value of the video-diary research method lies here, instead of with the mechanical process of recording the diary. The act of recording the videos and the additional contexts, such as the student-chosen backgrounds of the locations in the webcams, may prove very interesting from a sociological point of view (cf. Silverman, 2004,) but the actions of the learners in the recording process are less relevant to the research outcomes here than the content of their reflections. The use of video diaries for recording the HE learners' reflections is proposed in terms of an unobtrusive and passive recorder of their monologue, providing valuable phenomenological data. Their use can be justified in terms of offering unique access to the learner's reflective space, without the presence of an interviewer to affect the learner's flow of reflection.

Are there potential negative aspects of using video diaries for researching HE learner experiences? Once the decision to undertake a large-scale qualitative study of learner experience for close exploration of the participants' views has been taken, the negative aspects largely become the practicalities of the organisation of the research. This includes the enlisting of willing participants and the time consuming tracking of the contributions.

Additionally there are the requirements for researchers with technical expertise to capture the

original data, review, transcribe and analyse the large amounts of data resulting from the recordings - the STROLL transcripts totalled 790 pages. Maintaining secure management of the soft and hard copies of the data is accepted as a necessary part of the research administration process. The closest alternative qualitative method for data gathering on personal experiences is probably the semi-structured interview but as discussed above there are several reasons for preferring video diaries. These include the removal of the potential for power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee, the choice of the recording location and timing, and most importantly the spontaneity of reflection and privacy which together suggest that video diaries offer a richer and more valuable source of personal reflective data to the researcher.

The importance of video diaries in educational research for informing future best practice rests in the sharing of the outcomes from analysis of the learners' comments and relating these to further enhancement of the learner experience as noted in particular by Brown et al (2012) and Andrews and Tynan (2011). The rationale for using video diaries in educational research has matured through the process of each of the three main case studies considered and has been further demonstrated through the extensive examples from the associated research studies. Outcomes from the UK located studies on learner experiences have contributed through the substantive Jisc reports to developing corporate HE policy (see for example Jisc, 2009).

Initially video diaries may have been seen as a novel way to gather reflective data from learners about their own study lives but the process has now matured to the point of inviting HE students to reflect on what might enhance their own learning and to identify ways in which academics can learn from learners' reflections to enhance the overall quality of teaching and learning provision (Jefferies & Cubric, 2013). Developing the video diary

methodology in a manner which is led by the learners themselves has proved to be an invaluable and rewarding experience guided as it was by Boud's comment that:

...only learners themselves can learn and only they can reflect on their own experiences.

(Boud et al., 1985)

Video diaries thus offer an effective and valuable research tool for longitudinally exploring learners' reflections on their learning and for informing the development of future learning support.

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