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Process or Product
Portrait of Jackie Shaw
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Lives in Reading, United Kingdom

I grew up in Berkshire near a place called Sunningdale.

Mother and father were both nuclear physicists. So my dad was an academic. And so I guess we were fairly middle class family in that sense. But my father left when I was 11 and that launched us in into a very different life in that my mother didn't have, was a single parent without much money and we had a quite a tough time during that period of my life really.

And I think that's important because some of my desire to do something about injustice in the world is probably based in some of my early, certainly teenage experiences.

Growing Up In A Single Parent Family

Being part of a family with a single parent was quite unusual then and not many of my friends had had parents split up or divorced. Although obviously it's much more common then and I went, it happened when I changed from primary school to secondary school and suddenly my friends didn't want to talk to me anymore. And I was quite isolated and certainly not having much money in an area of relative affluence was quite hard.

But it also made me quite tough. I think in terms of being fairly self-contained and independent and wanting to work towards justice to some degree, for people who were disadvantaged. I wasn't particularly involved in political... politics with a capital P. But I was interested in ideas. And I was interested in, yes, speaking up against things that I thought were wrong. I did get involved.,, I suppose I was quite involved in and interested in the feminist movement that was going on at that time. So I spent quite a lot of time, with other young women talking about things, and probably more talking than action, at least in my teenage years.

Quite an Academic Child

I was quite an academic child and that was also one of my coping mechanisms I think, was that I...I'm not saying... I studied quite hard, I partied quite hard too but I did do quite well in terms of A-levels and went on to university ...and I went to Sussex University and I studied bio-physics there. So that seems a long way from community video anyways, but thinking back those teenage years as well I was very involved in drama and I was when I was at university and I think a lot of my interest in community arts came from being involved in drama through that time, dance as well.

And when I was at university I didn't I didn't do any community arts at university but I was in the drama club. We did lots of shows and I also did quite a lot of TV training there. They had a TV studios and I was involved in quite a lot of that.

No Jobs, No Opportunities

I finished my degree and then I went and lived in China for a while where I was teaching English - so just because it was a way to go and live somewhere different, and I wanted to get out of the UK and I was there for a couple of years. And when I came back it was the early Eighties, so it was a time, highly politicized time of mass unemployment. And whilst I'd been in China a lot of my friends in the UK had been searching for jobs - I mean it's very similar context I guess to now in many ways - had been trying to get jobs, not getting jobs. There were...all that I was getting in letters - no e-mail then - but by letter, was we can't find work, there was no work. Certainly in terms of science you know, I guess I was a scientist, the only jobs that existed were in the arms trade and nobody wanted to be part of the arms trade. So by the time I came back I was quite worked up about the idea that there were no jobs and no possibilities, no opportunities.

The Community Programme And Starting Out On Video

Really, a week or 10 days after I got back I managed to get a place on a Community Programme. It was basically a 'getting people off the unemployment register' exercise, in that the government sent ...there was state support for various community programmes which gave you a little bit more money than being on the dole and you were off the unemployment register.

So a lot of community organisations and people doing kind of more progressive work set up community programs to get stuff done. So actually it was a time of really interesting possibilities because there was lots of work that was happening, semi-state supported, that maybe...was some sort of resistance to what was happening in terms of the wider political context. So this Community Programme was work at South Hill Park, which is a big arts centre in Bracknell, and it was a community arts scheme for young people and there was money to support five community arts workers. So I got a place on that...based on my drama, film and video experiences really, and my interest in working with the community and that was in 1983. And there were five of those and one of the other people was Clive Robertson who co-founded Real Time and we started using video, then setting up video workshops for young people and started experimenting I suppose with the way we use video following that.

And.. I mean it was quite a strange place to be because this art centre got money for this youth arts scheme because they had a Under 18-year-old ban on the building. So young people under 18 couldn't go into the building and as a result of that had a lot of problems - people creating trouble. So they thought they'd set up this scheme for young people in response, which was kind of strange because we very soon got quite discomforted by this, in that, you know, what we doing setting up things in the building for people who...South Hill Park didn't, you know, for the organization that didn't want them there?. So we started going out into the community and doing work in the community and I guess Clive and I were quite different in our approach from some of the other people on the team, and so we were sort of working more and more together.

Video was relatively new then. So the kind of equipment we used was big. The cameras were big. The cameras and recorders were separate beasts. The video recorder we used was a U-matic Recorder which was kind of this size, had to be carted around. Often the batteries were just ordinary batteries gaffer taped together, and I do remember that sometimes they started to smoke! And so it was very, very different sort of equipment and very different sort of world.

Early Video Equipment, Recording And Playback

We were quite excited by the potential of using recording and playback processes because of the way people responded to it. So it seems to me tht...it was really engaging for people... obviously camcorders weren't so prevalent, people hadn't seen themselves on TV before. They wanted to learn how to use the equipment and it was very motivating to groups in that sense. But it also seemed to...take...people seem to go through a group processes a lot quicker than other forms that we were using. The discussion went deeper. What happened as a result happened quicker.

And that was a big motivation for me in wanting to take it further and work with it rather than other forms. And I guess I also saw it always as a bit of an umbrella medium, in that video can also incorporate other things, so it can incorporate drama or drawing ,painting and singing and dance and all sorts of other things as well.

Process vs Product?

But right from the beginning I was motivated as much by the group processes supported as I was for final products. Although... you know, there was a big process product split in the talk about these kind of approaches at that stage. And there still is, and I don't think it's a question of process or product, because there are always products, there are always bits of video if you like recorded: it's a question of what the purpose of that recording and playback is, for a particular group in a particular situation at that time so you, know: are the things recorded important for the group to watch back or reflect on? Or are they important for another audience? And I think even now I think practitioners need to get a lot clearer about that. And part of my work, work more recently has been in teasing that out, particularly some of the risks and dangers of the work as well in terms of the world we live in now which is all about sharing everything, you know the risks there are in that for vulnerable the kind of vulnerable groups that we sometimes work with.

Setting Up Real Time

And when that scheme finished we thought about what to do next. And that's when we decided to found Real Time in Reading, which was where we both lived, and we got a base at a community house in a particular part of east Reading. And again I think we used the kind of government schemes that were around at that time to fund the early work. So there was another scheme called the Enterprise Allowance Scheme which allowed you to get again a little bit more money than unemployment benefit to set up an enterprise. So Real Time was set up under that scheme and I think we also got support from another community programme which was connected with work with people with disabilities. And that's, that's how we started.

The Real Time Process

So we have a very particular set up where we start with a group of a maximum of eight people; generally where possible two facilitators, because there's a lot going on because there's someone working on the equipment, someone would, you know, what's going on in front of the camera. And we set up ... or our typical workshops set up will be with a camera on a tripod attached to a monitor with headphones and a hand mic – and round that camera we set a semicircle of chairs. So when people arrive they sit down and we're doing video work straight away. So we might do a little bit of introduction, but as soon as possible we get into using the equipment, and everyone takes turns so we have a number of exercises that we use. And we run... you know we might start working weekly with the group for an hour and a half, two hours and every session everyone uses the camera. Everyone is in front of the camera. And that starts with exercises, for instance like some sort of name game where people...one person goes on the camera and then the microphone is handed from person to person and each person says their name, something about themselves or, you know their favourite colour, or if they were an animal what animal they'd be - something kind of icebreakery. And the mic's handed around, the camera, it's just one shot. And then we play it back and everyone sees themselves, and then we do something else which might be lead on from that. So each person says something about something specific and then we watch it back; and then they say...ask the question to the next person and then we watch it back. And that's typically how a workshop starts. There are some important things about that: as I say everyone takes turns in every role, so the importance of that as far as I'm concerned is that often when you work with the group the tendency is for some people to feel quite confident about using the equipment and want to be in on it all the time, and other people who are terrified of it and stand back; and I think this kind of approach is a really important intervention as a facilitator in that dynamic in that it creates space for everyone to experience everything and get better.

Also you know there is a tendency for people [who] like being behind the camera to want to stay there and put other people on the spot, so we, everyone is in front of the camera as well and that's one of our ground rules. Because we find that, you know of course you get situations where you know maybe some people really, really don't want to do it and they're scared. But my experience – and I'd still standby it – is that if they don't take part from the beginning with everyone else they'll just get further and further excluded. And everyone doesn't like seeing themselves on camera. And if the group goes through it as a whole and we always have space to talk about what it feels like, and I always say how does everyone feel? Anyone embarrassed? I was! Then everyone knows that that's a normal part of the process and can move through that embarrassment together and become more confident together.

The other thing about this exercise and this is why I would really like to dig up some of those early shot by shot documentaries which happen very soon, it's not about taking six months to have a product: second session! It's often what we do and it's amazing how they're shot by shot documentaries stand together as a piece because each person makes a choice like a story consequences exercise, so that each shot follows on from the previous one. So you get back and you watch it and the group have made a documentary! And of course it's not tidy and neat. But next time you talk about planning, you've got something to refer to. And often those early shots by shot documentaries to get to what matters because people are going out into the context of a situation and talking about what matters to them from the very beginning.

The Importance Of A Group Process

So I think I was always...motivated by the group benefits and you know I will ground that a little in the then, in that I think it was really important at that time in the Eighties when, you know Thatcherism was rolling back the welfare state and, you know where individual rights that were supported by kind of the collective Welfare State were being turned into the idea of individual and family responsibility, and people being held responsible for their predicament, and you know, disadvantaged groups of various sorts who had maybe stood together previously, kind of being...set against each other by you know all that kind of...And it's happening now isn't it? Benefit scroungers and single parents and all the rest of it.

And I think that approach to bringing people together to build collective identities and take collective action, decide what they wanted to change in this situation, using kind of these kind of processes to work towards, building relationships that could help them do that.

'Community' Video Or 'Participatory' Video

There was a shift in whether people referred to this kind of work as community video or participatory video. And that was partly due to a desire to distinguish between community video as in: there's a community *production* unit with people who are trained who go back out to make community videos. And there were also a lot of community video workshops at that time which was set up so that people could gain skills go on courses and learn to make videos. And there was also the kind of community arts I suppose approach which was about people making things for themselves but also these wider social benefits that have been talking about. And it was quite difficult to distinguish between those things, and it was also in the context of the Channel 4 Workshops which were very much about making things for TV. And there was a real shift in things towards outputs and the quality of output and discussion about whether community videos were of sufficient quality. And it kind of shifted the whole discussion in a very product orientated way. So defining community video, or our approach to participatory video, was part of defining a different approach and concentrating on the on the process elements and the grounded elements and embedded elements that I was interested in.

My Academic Work: Reframing Participatory Video

So I guess part of my academic work was to try and re-frame what I then called participatory video as the means to drive particular social processes, that are about wider building of relationships, both firstly within a group, and then between the group and other people in the community, and then maybe outside to decision makers.

So recording, making video messages, short video programmes is part of that process but it's not the whole thing. The showing of what's made and the building of relationships or not because of that is also part of it.

Growing Through Confidence In Community Video

So you know there's the possibility of people gaining confidence from learning how to use the equipment or whatever, and increasing their sense or changing their self, sense of themselves and what they can achieve, and that is evidenced and documented. But there's also the possibility of people being left feeling less confident and exposed. So what are the

circumstances that help and hinder that. And my PhD also drew out some of the key factors...in helping achieve the kind of social outcomes that we were aiming for but also what hindered, what got in the way what made the risks more likely. And one key thing as an example is the real importance as far as I'm concerned, of clearly dividing out recording and playback - making short videos for internal processes, for the group to watch, or the group and their peers or their close supporters to watch, in order to increase their understanding of the situation and what's getting in the way and therefore doing something about themselves or making something else to go to an outside audience – and the bit of the process where they're making something for an outside audience because often that gets concertinaed together in this sharing world and we have. And you know people do give consent to their... It's fairly easy for a documentary maker to get someone to consent when they don't really understand what they're consenting to what the implications it might have.