

Film Education Conference

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Lecture Title: Voice, Autonomy & Utopian Desire in Participatory Filmmaking with Young Refugees

Script

Hello and welcome everybody. My name is Katja Frimberger and I will deliver your Informal Education lecture today. Thank you for having me on your module.

Today, I will present to you an informal education case study. This case study is a 6-months participatory filmmaking project, which I delivered with a local filmmaker here in Glasgow, for a group of young people with asylum and refugee backgrounds, who wanted to learn how to make a film for other new young arrivals.

My aim today is to use the case study to reflect on two relevant topics for informal, educational processes and practices. These two topics are: empowerment and hope.

Think about the term empowerment:

What do we mean when we speak of 'empowerment' as a goal for education, for example in policy? *Can* and should people (children, young people, adults) be empowered through education? And if so, what exactly is this dynamic of empowerment meant to be? Who is being empowered to do what exactly? What kind of teacher-student relationship does it imply? And how does this 'act of empowerment' actually look like in practice?

And what about the term hope?

What does hope have to do with education? It is such a fluffy term. How can you even define hope in a general way? I suppose we could all agree on 'good' or 'best' educational practices – but hopeful ones? At first glance, hope seems a rather 'odd', subjective term to qualify educational processes.

SLIDE 1 In this lecture, we will look at both themes – empowerment and hope - in the context of the practical filmmaking project 'Scotland, Our New Home'. My hope is that my theoretical reflections and practical examples will stimulate your own thinking about the wider meaning, purpose and practice of informal education.

SLIDE 2 The lecture will cover 4 main points.

I will first give you some more background on the film project itself.

Secondly, I will reflect on the 'moral dimension' of the film project and some of the challenges of working with refugees.

In the third part of the lecture, I will focus on three practical examples to demonstrate the educational processes that took place in our film project.

My first practical example – our experimentation with the film technique of the 'direct audience address' - illustrates how our film aesthetic was shaped in dialogue with project participants.

My second example comes from the making participant Sam's film vignette. It shows how the process of what you might want to call empowerment is not just an individual process, but a highly social and also affective undertaking.

My third example – of participant Laila who acted as the camera operator for Sam's vignette - demonstrates how the moment of 'refusing' to participate in aspects of a project plays an important role in asserting 'personal agency'.

Finally, in the fourth and last part of the lecture, I argue that empowerment is not a straightforward, linear act but always embedded in the complicated social and practical processes of specific projects – like our filmmaking project. And these processes of education also always and importantly involve the risk of failure.

SLIDE 3 A little bit more about the project's background:

SLIDE 4 'Scotland, Our New Home' was a collaboration with Glasgow filmmaker and animator Simon, and a group of 15 refugee young people between 16 and 21 years old, who were part of a peer mentoring group in Glasgow, dedicated to supporting other newly arrived young people in the process of making home in Scotland.

Our film project built on a previous animation project with the same name (Scotland, Our New Home) and the same group of peer mentors. For this first animation project, the young people wanted to create a film for a more general audience, with the aim to communicate the needs, challenges and hopes that newly arrived young people face in Scotland. They wrote a voice-over script, which filmmaker Simon translated into hand-drawn animated images. The peer mentors took the animation to a Film Festival and showed it at a number of youth events and conferences.

Our follow-up film project was motivated by the peer mentors enthusiasm to now make a film that could explicitly support new arrivals in the process of making home in Scotland. They wanted to

learn how to make a film that could be of use to individual young people as well as refugee support organisations.

SLIDE 5 What was the project's 'moral dimension'? What about its goals, underpinning assumptions and pedagogical philosophy?

SLIDE 6 Scholars who study documentary filmmaking tell us that we cannot really escape this moral dimension in our work. A project's wider moral principles, explicitly stated, or implicitly assumed, always rub against the reality of a project. The moral dimensions takes form in the little details - social encounters, relationship-building, and moments of negotiating aesthetic, social and ethical decisions in a project.

SLIDE 7 As part of being reflexive about this moral project dimension, we had to specifically consider the challenges when working with refugees.

It was crucial to make sure that our final visual representations in the film were embedded in reflection on the power-relations between project filmmakers/educators and participants.

It was also important to keep in mind, and ideally not to replicate, the depersonalizing and objectifying tendencies in ethnographic filmmaking when it portrays a 'universal' – rather than personal - 'refugee story'.

The public communication spaces of news and social media often portray familiar visual archetypes or stereotypes of refugees, for example, the 'refugee as the victim' who needs our help and our voice, or the 'refugee as a threat' who is to be feared, for example as a potential terrorist. Interestingly, *both* stereotypes can potentially de-humanise refugees.

Media's main focus on the ethics and citizenship of the 'non-refugee viewer' - who helps the refugee victim, maybe donates money to organizations and protests on behalf of refugees – does not necessarily 'empower' refugees. In fact, this refugee-as-victim focus can potentially prohibit a focus on refugees' own rights to shape their own self-representations. The victim media stereotype might obscure the importance for people to articulate their own life histories, their trajectories and hopes for their lives.

SLIDE 8 We also had to keep in mind that included in this right to self-representation, is also the right to *refuse* to partake in the sharing of personal narratives in film.

Refusal can actually act as a way to assert political agency and resist the educator's, researcher's or filmmaker's own unquestioned desire to produce a typical 'refugee narrative'.

Stories about refugees in academia or in film are very often pain-based. They often focus on the damage that people have experienced, in the hope to raise consciousness about injustices and broker social change, for example with government. The problem with a pain-based or damage-centred approach to refugee narratives however can be that it promotes the idea that refugee's voices are only authentic and relevant if they tell narratives of pain.

When we conflate authenticity of voice with only a painful story, there can be the danger that we automatically relegate refugees' voices as having to speak from the margins as a symbol of deprivation, lack and unfulfilled longing that they can never control their own lives or other people always need to 'save' them.

SLIDE 9 With the aim to consider the complexity of human desire and striving, with is more than just pain, we wanted to work in our film project from a 'desire-based framework' that acknowledges not only 'the painful elements of social and psychic realities' but also the hope and aspirations that people hold for their lives.

The most important and hopeful message participants' wanted to communicate to new arrivals in their film was 'that they were not alone but that there are other young people like them in Scotland and that a new life was possible'.

The young people's emphasis on the relational and affective nature of making a home has of course particular significance to the situation of unaccompanied new arrivals, when at-home-ness and everyday normality have been lost for young refugees who arrived without parents or relative. Home, is a relational metaphor that emphasises the importance of well-being, love and acceptance.

Our project participants clearly did not want to speak, or make a film, from the margins, but rightly positioned themselves as 'experts by experience' in the art of making a home, right from the project start. They wanted to give hope to other new arrivals through their film.

The question for us project filmmakers and educators' was then how to honour young people's desire to give hope to other new arrivals through our project pedagogy?

SLIDE 10 I will focus on 3 project examples to illustrate the kind of educational processes that evolved as a response to young people's desire to 'give hope'.

SLIDE 11 Firstly, I will talk to you about our experimentation with a film technique called the 'direct audience address'. This aesthetic technique will be familiar to you from films like 'Ferris Buehler's day out' and 'whatever works' with Larry David.

We decided to try out the technique of speaking directly to camera as a way of aesthetically translating young people's aim to mentor new arrivals through their films.

The project filmmaker and I developed learning materials that looked at how characters establish contact through the direct address - to comment on the story, give insight into their motivations, or even ridicule, the storytelling dynamic itself.

Participants decided to experiment with speaking directly to camera as a way to establish immediate contact. They wanted to use the direct audience as an aesthetic technique for the social purpose of establishing intimacy with their off screen audience of new arrivals, not as an aesthetic device in and of itself.

SLIDE 12 We filmed participants' practical advice to other young people as every day, recreated scenarios. These scenarios involved friends playing football, a first day at college, the moment of establishing trust with a social worker or meeting new folks at a social gathering at the Refugee Council.

The scenes were first filmed in a wide and medium shot, and then focused on one young person speaking directly to camera, encouraging the off-screen audience of other new arrivals to join the activities.

Based on their own experience of arriving in Scotland, participants addressed concerns that might stop young people from reaching out, assuring them with sentences like 'you don't have to worry, people are really nice here', 'and everybody is learning English together' - spoken directly into the camera lens.

SLIDE 13 On review of the footage, we realised the technique of the direct audience address just didn't work. The aesthetic technique didn't translate young people's desire to give hope to new arrivals.

The direct audience address pushed the potential viewers of new arrivals awkwardly from the observer to the participant mode. Participants clearly felt uncomfortable speaking their advice to an off-screen audience of mentees whose actual needs were impossible to fully anticipate before meeting them in person.

One of our project participants, Claudia, got to the heart of it. She said that *'it was impossible to give the same advice to everybody. Every young person arriving in Scotland was different'*. Given the uniqueness of every newly arriving young person, the aesthetic technique of the direct audience address falsely assumed that all new arrivals were the same.

Reviewing our footage with the group, it became clear that it was important to keep in mind for our filmmaking that every young person arriving has hopes for their lives that are richly varied and not static either.

SLIDE 14 Our aesthetic experiment with the direct audience address felt awkward because it aesthetically presumed that newly arrived young people were not just a 'mixed category of people sharing a certain legal status' of being a refugee but were something like an 'essentialized anthropological "tribe"' who all shared 'a common nature'.

Trying to give advice and communicate to new arrivals the 'possibilities for a good life' in Scotland in this universalised way, assumed that all young people's 'social and psychic realities' were the same because they happened to be asylum seekers or refugees.

SLIDE 15 As a result, it was important for our project to keep in mind that, although all legally refugees or asylum seekers, newly arrived young people differ enormously in almost every other aspect of their lives: such as their 'socioeconomic status, personal histories and psychological and spiritual situations', as well as of course in their cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds, personal interests and, of course, personalities.

SLIDE 16 Reflecting on Claudia's insight that 'every young person was different' with the group, we decided to create instead short documentary vignettes about *individual* project participants who share everyday stories of how they *personally* made, and are still in the process of, making a home in Scotland.

My next two examples will further demonstrate how young people's act of participating and refusing to participate in aspects of the project, were important expression of their agency and autonomy.

SLIDE 17 Let us look at the making of Sam's vignette first. Sam was one of our project participants and he wanted to be filmed for the documentary.

He wanted to communicate the role that community, music-making with others and the city of Glasgow itself played in his own process of making home. On the invitation of an older peer mentor, Sam had joined a Glasgow youth Street Samba band called 'Samba Ya Bamba'. On Sam's request, our project filmmaker Simon filmed him proudly holding his trombone on the steps of the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art in the heart of Glasgow. Sam also invited Simon to film him during one of the band's street performances in the heart of the city.

Meeting Sam again to record his voiceover for the documentary, it was impossible to miss what he considered a key point in the art of making a home. He 'lit up' and spoke passionately about his

experience of making music as part of the youth street band. The joy of communal music-making and meeting people had been a significant aspect of his own journey of feeling at home in Glasgow. He wanted other young people to know the positive, relaxing effect that music could have on their life. He wanted to convey the sense of connection that can come from making something together with other people in a group, especially when you have left your country and are unsure about what the future will bring.

Additionally, he wanted to communicate that it was completely normal to feel disoriented in the big city, where all buildings first look the same, the bus timetables are difficult to decipher, and you initially hope that maybe every bus just runs past your house. Sam enjoyed walking through the city to familiarise himself with his surroundings, even if he sometimes got lost. He wanted to encourage new arrivals that it was normal to feel shy about asking for help and direction because you think your English is not good enough.

He also wanted to get across that it is only a question of time and practice until you make friends who can show you around, until you can read the map app on your phone, and feel more confident about navigating the public transport and even asking strangers for help. In Sam's case (and all others), it always took at least an hour, and sometimes longer, until participants felt they had expressed what they wanted to say in their voiceover in a satisfactory way.

SLIDE 17 We often started with asking 'what do you think young people should know when they first arrive in Glasgow?' allowing for the time and space for participants to formulate their thoughts on the subject. The question itself was of course not entirely new. It was a continuation of conversations we had had from early on in the project, and which had led to the various aesthetic experiments (like the direct audience address experiments I mention) and which had brought us to the making of the documentary vignettes.

(back to slide 17)As you can see from my descriptions, the voiceover session framed young people through their expertise as peer mentors. They acted as experts in the art of making at home rather than as 'documentary subject' per se. During the voiceover recording we had to pay attention to *what* the young people wanted to communicate but also to *how* they were affectively communicating hope to new arrivals.

SLIDE 18 Sam's key message about the making of community through music, the moment when he lit up speaking about the band, was as much a response to the needs of the external audience of new arrivals, as much as it is of course an expression of his own self-hood and personality, rooted in his own unique 'social and psychic reality' (ibid) of starting to feel at home in the city.

Our pedagogical interactions had to be of course modulated according to this uniqueness of every young person's personality. A focus on young people's desire to give hope to other new arrivals, also necessarily undermined the idea that the authenticity of their voice was only related to their painful narratives.

Slide 19 Let us now look at another example from the filmmaking project that demonstrates the role that refusal and participation played in young people asserting their agency in the project.

Laila was one of the project participants who wanted to learn more about the technical aspects of camera work. She had been one of the leading scriptwriters in our previous animation project and was keen to participate in the filmmaking project.

We had developed a range of educational resources to train young people in the technical and practical aspects of filmmaking, in preparation for the making of the documentary vignettes. One such resource was an example film that we made to raise participants' curiosity about filmmaking, introduce ourselves and win the group's trust in our ability as film educators.

Young people's experience in watching films varied, but they were clearly influenced by, and sometimes keen to present, their knowledge of modern (mostly Western) popular film culture. Those who had resided in Glasgow for a longer period had named American superhero films like the *Avengers* franchise, the *Fast & Furious* action movies, as well as *Japanese Anime*, as their favourite films; one young man loved modern horror movies; another participant enjoyed romantic comedies like *Titanic* and the *Notebook*, which they borrowed from their college library. Others had watched long-form films and documentaries (like *Mr Bean*, *Planet Earth*) mostly as part of their ESOL class, or at film evenings at their children's care unit. And some of the young people, had only recently been to the cinema for the first time.

Watching the example film, participants giggled at the strange, and sometimes funny, moments they recognised from their own everyday experiences, for example, when I, all dressed up in shorts and covered in sun cream, am surprised by a sudden cloudburst.

After the screening, participants wanted to know how we had filmed the cloudburst (a watering can over Katja's head), organised everything and how we decided on the locations in the film and filmed scenes out of order. Laila was one of the most curious in trying to get her head around this process of translating ideas into the process of production.

SLIDE 19 Laila seemed somewhat intimidated by the process of translating ideas into images. She frequently affirmed her fascination, but more often declared her perceived inability to take on any of the technical roles required.

We had devised a film education session around a song that the group had listened to during one of their peer mentoring sessions: 'Happy' by Pharrell Williams.

We decided the song's catchy tune would lend itself perfectly to a relaxed and enjoyable session. We wanted young people to gain a first glimpse into the creation of a visual moment, by devising their own dance choreographies, and taking on some responsibility for the filming itself. It was a truly chaotic but fun session.

It was a great bonding activity that had us all laughing about the impossibility of coordinating our dance moves in time and rhythm to the music. A group of young people, including their teacher and social worker, were out on the college grounds, trying to rehearse a 'human alphabet' for the beginning of the video; others were devising a 'rap sequence' under the tutelage of one of the participants, and I was trying to choreograph a line of people into synchronised head and hand movements for the final moment of the video.

Amongst the chaos, Laila was curiously following Simon who was overseeing the filming, giving her a running commentary on how to pan, tilt and zoom, film handheld and on a tripod. She had volunteered to act as the camera assistant but had vehemently refused to take on the full role and responsibility of the camera operator, because she was worried she would 'mess it all up'. After some time in her apprenticeship role, and encouragement on Simon's part, she agreed to film some of the rap sequence in the video. She started to panic when she realised that she was not able to fit all the dancers into her shot.

She almost gave up, when Simon encouraged her to try something more counter-intuitive. He challenged her to set the camera as wide as it would go, to 14mm, and place it on the ground. Rather than framing the dancers in eye-line, Laila tilted it up at the people dancing, so that they seemed like giants making huge, exaggerated steps. She was fascinated by this unexpected visual result and ended up filming the whole sequence on her own.

She was pleased with her newly gained insight, as she had realised that filming is not so much the task of making a record of a moment, but a creation and interpretation of a moment, in which the camera, and herself as the operator, are active participants.

SLIDE 19 Laila's curiosity about the filmmaking process never stopped, even if she never became entirely confident in leading the filming decisions on her own. Even towards the end of the production process, when acting as the camera person for Sam's vignette, and after many sessions where she had experimented with different angles and camera set-ups in our training sessions, Laila was always most comfortable in the role of apprentice and assistant. When filming Sam at the bus

stop looking at the timetable, she performed a complicated tilting shot that included racking focus on the overhead bus route plan, with the aim to mirror some of Sam's experience of the public transport slowly 'coming in to focus' for him.

Although the participant production team of three (Laila, Sam and Tariq) had come up with the scene's images, in which Sam re-creates a moment of feeling confused about how the public transport works, and walks pensively amongst the bustling city crowd, project filmmaker Simon had suggested some of the camera angles: the close-up filmed through the glass back of the bus stop, the slow motion long lens shots of Sam walking in the crowd, and the above-mentioned tilting shot.

All three participants were always curious to see how a shot turned out, keen to watch the footage back and review its aesthetic quality to decide if we had to do another take, again.

As you can see from these moments of learning about, and interaction in, filmmaking, our project process was an intensely social process, in which autonomy, collaboration and teacher authority were negotiated on a moment-by-moment basis. Laila, for example, participated in some, but as mentioned, also refused to participate in other aspects of the filmmaking process, as an important expression of her autonomy and agency.

SLIDE 20 For her own vignette Laila wanted to be filmed working on her laptop, taking a book from the bookshelf, whilst narrating her advice to other young people. Laila was determined to use her vignette to encourage other new arrivals that, although learning English often seemed like an insurmountable task, even if you already spoke several languages, it could be accomplished.

As Laila says in her vignette 'If I can do it I believe everyone can do it. That's what I believe'. Laila decided to tell other young people about her own experience of being so scared of going to college on her first day that she was shaking.

Although she wasn't initially sure if she 'would be able to learn anything at all' (as she put it), because she had never been to school before and couldn't read or write, Laila completed four ESOL levels in one year and now attended a mainstream accountancy course at her college, working to go to university soon.

Early on in the project, Laila had identified her going to college and the support and encouragement she received there from her teachers and fellow students, as a key landmark in her process of making home in Glasgow. We had also taken Laila's insight into this process of making home to devise a training session around the making of a short film about a 'first day at college'.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this lecture, young people's acts of finding a voice and asserting their autonomy, by shaping their self-representation in the film, took form within the intensely social process and pragmatic (technical and aesthetic) requirements of a film project.

SLIDE 21 This emancipatory process of a young person 'finding their voice' in our film project, was not a straightforward, individual developmental process towards 'empowerment'. Film-making can take of course years, or indeed a lifetime, to master properly and it would be strange to claim that one 6-months participatory filmmaking project, no matter how careful the planning and devising of learning resources, could 'empower' any young person into complete autonomy and singular artistic expression. We cannot presuppose that the educational ideal of empowerment is a given in any project.

Scottish youth arts and integration policies of course recognise the important aim of for example holistic education and empowerment for refugees. But is there maybe a danger that if we associate our project too easily, or functionally, with these important aims that we could deny the *actual* educational processes that take place on the ground?

We have to keep in mind that the educational processes that took place in our film project were complicated social processes of participation and refusal on the side of participants and processes of aesthetic co-creation that also involved us project educators and filmmakers. These were not just individual, independent acts of asserting agency and voice, but were fully interdependent with the aesthetic and social processes, as I have shown in my practical examples.

It is vital for what I called at the beginning of my lecture a reflexive practice and research that we do not gloss over these moral deliberations that necessarily emerge from informal educational projects, but honour these complex pedagogical processes and the situational ethics that make up each project in a different way.

A disregard of our concrete pedagogical interactions, in favour of a universalising idea of empowerment, in which empowerment is thought happens in a more straightforward and individualised way; one maybe that aligns neatly with 'individualised' policy objectives, could potentially run the danger of erasing young people's context-specific and 'unique' acts of asserting their autonomy and voice during the filmmaking process.

Could a denial of a situational view of our project ethics potentially even render meaningless young people desire to give hope to other new young arrivals through their film, given that this hope could only be translated into the filmmaking through experimentation and in a social process, as I have shown in the 3 filmmaking examples?

If our project ethics was shaped by our concrete pedagogical interactions in our film project it can, as a consequence, of course also 'fail' in terms of 'delivering' any of the aims of empowerment or holistic education as outlined in policy. And I would argue that this risk of failure is an important part of the educational process itself, because otherwise, we would not have allowed ourselves to experiment at all perhaps - with how young people's desire to give hope could be translated into our project pedagogy, and ultimately into the final film young people made for new arrivals, to help them with the process of making home in Scotland.