

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

Author(s): Boivin, Nettie; CohenMiller, Anna

Title: Breaking the “Fourth Wall” in Qualitative Research: Participant-Led Digital Data Construction

Year: 2018

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Boivin, N., & CohenMiller, A. (2018). Breaking the “Fourth Wall” in Qualitative Research: Participant-Led Digital Data Construction. *Qualitative Report*, 23(3), 581-592. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3136>

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

3-12-2018

Breaking the “Fourth Wall” in Qualitative Research: Participant-Led Digital Data Construction

Nettie Boivin

University of Jyväskylä, nettiethai@gmail.com

Anna CohenMiller

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, anna@cohenmiller.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Boivin, N., & CohenMiller, A. (2018). Breaking the “Fourth Wall” in Qualitative Research: Participant-Led Digital Data Construction. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(3), 581-592. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss3/6>

This How To Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Breaking the “Fourth Wall” in Qualitative Research: Participant-Led Digital Data Construction

Abstract

This article reconstructs the typical researcher-participant focus - where the participants are doing for us - instead we followed the participants' lead in the construction of research. Using a qualitative literacy event case study as an example, we describe how participants unexpectedly co-constructed knowledge through a participant-led digital data collection. In this theoretical article, we provide an explanation of the original study, which used observations, semi-structured interviews, and home visits as a collective qualitative case study on parental participation in social literacy practices. The original investigation led to the important shift that occurred in participant-researcher roles. In this article, using an ethnographic perspective, we explain how unexpected digital data creations created by participants' family members allowed for enhanced equity between researcher and participant through changing the research dynamic, hearing and seeing participant voice previously unavailable. Situated within socio-cultural construction and the concept of Diderot's concept of the fourth wall (the invisible barrier between audience and actor), we explain how these new insights provide opportunities for other qualitative researchers to enhance their practices through an ontological shift, intentionally “breaking the fourth wall of research” to integrate participant co-construction of knowledge

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Fourth Wall, Ethnography, Community of Learning, Co-Constructed Knowledge

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Breaking the “Fourth Wall” in Qualitative Research: Participant-Led Digital Data Construction

Nettie Boivin

University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

A. S. CohenMiller

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, Astana, Kazakhstan

This article reconstructs the typical researcher-participant focus - where the participants are doing for us - instead we followed the participants' lead in the construction of research. Using a qualitative literacy event case study as an example, we describe how participants unexpectedly co-constructed knowledge through a participant-led digital data collection. In this theoretical article, we provide an explanation of the original study, which used observations, semi-structured interviews, and home visits as a collective qualitative case study on parental participation in social literacy practices. The original investigation led to the important shift that occurred in participant-researcher roles. In this article, using an ethnographic perspective, we explain how unexpected digital data creations created by participants' family members allowed for enhanced equity between researcher and participant through changing the research dynamic, hearing and seeing participant voice previously unavailable. Situated within socio-cultural construction and the concept of Diderot's concept of the fourth wall (the invisible barrier between audience and actor), we explain how these new insights provide opportunities for other qualitative researchers to enhance their practices through an ontological shift, intentionally “breaking the fourth wall of research” to integrate participant co-construction of knowledge. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Fourth Wall, Ethnography, Community of Learning, Co-Constructed Knowledge

Introduction

Ethnographic language and literacy research tends to be a fluid process but often still hinges on answering questions posed by the researcher. In 2016, I (first author) conducted a case study along with people on community literacy practices. In this study, we noticed changes within the study. This theoretical article reports on the observed changes and the development of a new perspective on ethnographic research, an ontological shift, which demonstrated a co-construction of research led by the participants. Specifically, we articulate how the use of socially interactive mobile technology, enabled all participants to collaboratively engage in qualitative research.

The original study was a co-production of literacy events amongst intragenerational family members. However, through utilization of digital devices and the creation of a community online-space, we “noticed” that diverse voices were being better communicated. The study uncovered a new research paradigm suited for ethnographic language and culture studies. As such, this article provides highlights on how to enable true co-participation of research thus enabling multiple and diverse voices. The new insights, which emerged from the digital data created and shared by participants, occurred through what we are terming as, *breaking the fourth wall* of research.

New Research Paradigm

Qualitative research commonly recognizes the participants' voice as a crucial component of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Yet in ethnographic research, situated in the field of language and cultural practices, there is often an attempt by researchers to immerse themselves fully within a context (Anders, Yaden Jr., Da Silva Iddings, Katz, & Rogers, 2016; Bell & Pahl, 2017). However, despite the emphasis on becoming an insider within the context, researchers still must assess/interpret what they observe. Heath and Street (2008) describe this interpretation as a "dialogic between existing explanations and judgments and on-going data collection and analysis" (p. 57). Moreover, recent multilingual literacy practices reflect processes of knowledge production in far more diverse contexts thus, requiring research methods providing all voices to co-construct the data (Bell & Pahl, 2017 p. 105). In other fields, there have been attempts at joint production (Pauwels, 2015). As Pauwels states, "human studies involve some kind of interaction between the researcher and the researched" (2015, p.111). In ethnography, some researchers are assessing the difference between collaborative versus participatory (Mitchell & De Lange, 2011, p. 171) research methods in attempt to provide voice of the participants. Thus, there is an evident growing interest in the co-participatory of research.

Increasingly researchers in the field of literacy and sociolinguistics are discussing the notion of voice through co-production of research. This attempted shift can be seen in such approaches a, community of practice (Hart et al., 2013) or dialogic co-inquiry (Banks et al., 2014). Moreover, methods utilized in arts-based projects have attempted to implement more collaborative, dialogic, and social practices (Kester, 2004). Wolgemuth et al. argues for "moving from an "old paradigm," positivist orientation, toward a present that includes "new paradigm research" (2015, p. 352). In the field of literacy practices, one of the leading proponents of co-production in research is Kate Pahl. Her research with immigrant youth co-producing videos is at the forefront of the shift in research paradigm (Escott & Pahl, 2017). There have been other fields which have utilized action research and participatory action research in an effort to provide voice in collective knowledge production (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). However, as Escott and Pahl (2017) argue, often academia dismisses such action research as not scholarly enough.

As some researchers attempt to overcome the "invisible hierarchies" existing between academic and non-academic partners (Escott & Pahl, 2017), this invisible hierarchy is what we are terming (which will be defined later) as the fourth wall between the participant and the researcher. Trying to overcome this is essential for researchers who wish to provide a voice for their participants. Facer and Pahls' (2017) research posits the voice of the youth through framing the question in the everyday esthetics of expanding what is considered literacy practices. However, these studies center on co-production or the making of the material product in the hands of the youth, however, they do not highlight how co-participatory research methods can occur. For the present study, the difference occurred through the participants own smart phone devices, which we discuss in greater depth later. Consequently, as Escott & Pahl, (2017) referred to as the "invisible hierarchy" this co-participatory rather than co-production, through placing mobile devices in the participants hands provides, as we will argue, a breaking of the academic objective fourth wall. This is important to examine, in language and culture studies as Taylor and Hughes (2016) write, "post-humanist research is an enactment of knowing-in-being that emerges in the event of doing research itself" (p. 18). For ethnographic researchers, particularly in the field of language and culture studies who are investigating marginalized, diverse, and powerless participants, there is a need to create democratic research thereby transcending the "notions of research participation as mere" data within to co-participating in deciding what constitutes data (Chimirri, 2015, p. 43). This requires a shift in

ontological understanding (Chimirri, 2015; Escott & Pahl, 2017). Furthermore, others have argued that with digital technology and a realignment of how we view knowledge as “ways of knowing” (Paul & Marfo, 2001), research must reflect this shift. Before discussing how to break the fourth wall it is important to provide a quick overview of the original research study.

Original Research Study and Context

The original literacy events case study utilized mixed-methods consisting of 25 hours of qualitative and quantitative semi-structured questionnaires, session and home observations, and video-recorded interviews and activities in the literacy sessions in a local community in Kazakhstan. The participants were five case study Kazakh families with children between the ages of two to seven. Most participants could speak some Kazakh, but more typically communicated in Russian. Informed consent was given both orally and in written form in the participants’ language of choice. The researchers continually videotaped family interaction, during literacy events, with the approval of all participants, using video cameras, smart phones, mobiles, and tablets. These video clips give a clearer picture of beliefs, attitudes and shifts, and language practices and ideology in literacy activities. The participants, who agreed to the videotaping, gradually became oblivious to the recordings.

Surprisingly, during the sessions the family members began to use their own smart phones to videotape their children and grandchildren. The participant-created videos were shared with other families and the researchers and participants agreed to the use of their videos for data analysis (references withheld). After data collection, the interviews and video of the sessions were coded to answer the research questions. Learning practices were assessed as being either parent-centered or child-centered. Videos were normed amongst the researchers to assure data results were consistent. The participants with the mobile devices in the original study become the constructors of the knowledge when they choose to share. Therefore, for ethnographic research, we suggest that breaking the fourth wall is a moment when the audience/participants become actors/researchers. Then thinking about observations of behavior, in family language, cultural and literacy ethnographic studies there is a drama of mediating knowledge and identity across generations.

While the original study was assessing the co-production of literacy practices using shared digital devices, a new co-participatory research occurred, one that created a shift in the research paradigm, breaking down the fourth wall. We discovered that this new paradigm of “breaking the fourth wall” occurred through participant-led digital devices provided voice and equity for the participants while allowing for unexpected participant shared truths to be revealed. Before discussing the conceptual framework of our theoretical stance let us highlight way the term was chosen.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

Using Diderot’s theatrical metaphor of the fourth wall (the invisible boundary between audience and actor), this article argues for a “breaking the fourth wall of research” through participant-led digital data construction to facilitate understanding of participant voice (Escott & Pahl, 2017). This also extends from the concept of invisible barrier. The notion or definition of a “fourth wall” is taken from the original context of an invisible wall between audience and actors stated by Diderot in 18th century theatre (Bell, 2008). We see the “fourth wall” as an applicable metaphor in research, where there is a similar invisible wall between participant and researcher. Therefore, when referring to the fourth wall of research, this means participants live a life that is not easily reachable by researchers, one socio-culturally constructed and lived

behind a veil (Atkinson, Delamont, & Housley, 2008). Participants “perform” particular social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and gendered practices within their daily lives and for/with researchers. In theatre, the breaking of a fourth wall indicates the moment when the actors turn from interacting with one another within a scripted context and engages with the audience. It is a metaphor that in ethnographic research likewise seems applicable.

In research, even during ethnographic observation there is the notion that interpretation always takes place within the ideological framework of a researcher because of his or her knowledge and experience (Rose, 2007, p. 26). If the researcher is honest and reflective then the data obtained has a good chance of being valid (Rose, 2007). Such dependability, however, does not negate the powerful effect the researcher has within the study. Participant observation is a tool for collecting data and as Heath and Street (2008) stated, “Only rarely can we shed features of ourselves to be a real participant” (p. 31). However, shedding the researcher stance is possible when the researcher and participants co-construct knowledge. In this instance the researcher is not the academic but becomes the collaborator because the researcher is reliant not on what the participants produced through practices as data but rather what they choose to capture on video as important data in the process.

In this article, we demonstrate a breaking of the fourth wall of research when participants became researchers, unexpectedly, co-constructing knowledge. We describe how in using mobile technology, parents and grandparents unexpectedly led the documentation of their children’s participation in a research study engaging in both creating new data (e.g., videos, photos, online social media discussions) and new knowledge through sharing of the data with family members (Facer & Pahl, 2017; Franks, 2009). The unexpected digital data allowed for enhanced equity between researcher and participant through breaking the fourth wall, hearing and seeing participant voice previously unavailable. We argue for re-imagining the traditional researcher-participant relationship, moving away from co-constructed researcher-led to co-constructed participant-led research, and the opportunities in breaking the fourth wall of research. Our findings provide insight for other qualitative researchers to enhance their practices through such an ontological shift, intentionally breaking the fourth wall of research to integrate participant co-construction of knowledge.

Pink (2008) suggests the researcher needs to get closer to participants than the ideas of “data” or “observation” suggest, through sharing experiences, places, and activities to facilitate “the production of meaning in participation with them through a shared activity in a shared place” (p. 232). This does not involve the collection of data as such but rather a “shared conversation” in which the researcher empathetically works to “produce knowledge with others” (Pink, 2008, p. 232). Some might question the ethical implications of using data constructed from others. However, our argument questions the very nature of this idea. *Why not allow participants to construct their lived experience from their point of view in providing their choice of data, instead of confining them to the perspective of the researcher, to provide more inclusivity and giving more authentic voice to the participants?* Isn’t this the ultimate ethnographic tool for observation, one which is truly co-constructed from the participant?

This new approach allowed a cooperative “breaking the fourth wall of research.” These new insights were garnered because of co-participatory research methods employed through mobile devices. The breaking of the “fourth wall” in research is in line with learning research that posits learning is co-constructed collaboratively through multimodality (Rowse, 2013). There are three components in breaking the fourth wall that expand the idea of co-participatory ethnographic research. One is the digital devices provide a participant led data collection. Second is the concept of voice as digitally the participants are creating knowledge and data consecutively. Finally, is component of equity as sharing knowledge amongst themselves creates an equal footing between the researchers and participants as they are choosing what to record and share. Moreover, these participant-led digital recordings provided unexpected data

that provide a richer understanding of language and culture. These were participant shared revelations. This depth of knowledge through co-participatory research is created through breaking of the fourth wall. The first component in this new paradigm is to comprehend our position regarding co-participatory research as it extends from how others term and define co-participatory research.

Digital Spaces in Co-Participation

With the advent and regular use of smartphones and mobile technology, with apps, videos, audio, and social networking integration, there are changes in research that lead toward a more participant controlled social interaction during the research process. Tablets and mobile phones are portable and widely accessible, thereby providing participants with the ability to communicate and control what they are communicating and sharing, “Social practices change as digital spaces become embedded in a culture” (Hallet, 2014, p. 312). As Rowsell (2013) has stated that children in the 21st century are mediating and negotiating meaning across multiple modalities. Moreover, children are co-constructing, designing, and creating their own communication and knowledge. In the same way that educators are now seeking to be learner-centered, qualitative researchers likewise are shifting their focus towards a more participant-led approach. For example, as a literacy researcher, I (first author) was conducting research examining 21st century learning which situates knowledge and literacy practices as co-constructed. So why wasn’t my research utilizing similar participant-led research practices?

As ethnographic methods extend into the use of digital technology this creates more space, both on and off-line, which are co-constructed to participate in. As Hallet and Barber (2014) state, these spaces provide co-participation “to gain a deeper understanding of how people experience, perceive, create, and navigate the social world” (p. 307). In addition, co-participation with digital devices reduces the position of power between the interviewer and interview, as the participant is equal to the researched through their creation of the data. Therefore, participants are not just data objects for the research but are provided with a voice regarding what is the research (Chimirri, 2015). An example of this was witnessed in the digital data the participants filmed in the initial literacy event.

While technology advances communication and learning, it is similar to the printing press, or typewriter, a mere tool (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). We argue that it is not what is recorded but the *how*. Therefore, in ethnographic research one must move away from utilizing technology as a simple data collection device. Recordings, such as digital mobile videotaping are still a static event once recorded. This is due to two factors. First, the recording is from the researcher’s perspective. Secondly, the participants are aware they are being videotaped. In addition, in this “selfie” culture people often try to present their best “face” forward (Goffman, 1959). The reference to “selfie” culture stems from the fact that there are celebrities, singers, bloggers, comedians and others who utilize posing for pictures i.e., selfies as a form of social media communication. There is, as Goffman (1959) discusses a “presentation of self” that keeps participants from showing complete authenticity. Participants may not fully relax as video cameras even subconsciously create a divider between the researcher and participants, regardless of how small the camera is. Therefore, there remains divide or “fourth wall” between the researcher and participant created by the researcher controlling what is filmed and when it is filmed. We are arguing that even in the field of ethnography, there is a researcher-centric “fourth wall” that divides the researcher from a deeper unexpected reality. Thus, there is a lack of co-construction or co-sharing of knowledge, so we need to shift the paradigm to include co-participation through participant-led digital taping. This also, provides voice for the participants.

Voice

Most ethnographic researchers aim to give voice to the participants. However, during observation of socio-cultural, ethnic, and identity practices, often the intentional and actual practices differ. Participants will try to “save face” in front of “the researcher.” What one believes and what one does can be different. Furthermore, even with an in-depth study, where the researcher remained with the group, there was always a divider. Illustrating this is the fact that in many cultures, such as Kazakh, when you enter a home you are and always will be a guest. As such, you are treated more formally (Dave, 2007). Therefore, no matter how long a researcher spends with a family observing them you will still be treated as a guest. As other researchers have noted that “potentially muted by cultural norms of reciprocity that regulate relations between those in power and those who are dependent” (Madianou, Longboan, & Ong, 2015, p. 3023). This etiquette barrier creates an invisible wall from truly observing a participants’ lived experience (Rogoff, 2008). For ethnographic researchers, in the area of language, culture, and identity, this hinders a truly deep investigation. Moreover, family language policy, particularly in multilingual language ecology (Schwartz, 2010), often creates this barrier, or a fourth wall existing in the videotaping of home observation. However, the digital data co-constructed by the participants included data in the home as well as in the literacy event sessions.

Equity in Sharing

While data collection modalities are shifting, the philosophy behind the approach of ethnography has remained somewhat constant (Holden & Lynch, 2004). As such, knowledge is always being interpreted, creating an invisible barrier, constructing research which is informed from the vantage point of the researcher rather than from the participants’ perspective. This is because the digital tools are in the hands of the researcher rather than participant. However, some argue that, we must become “attentive to the ways in which users navigate media environments. How people appropriate communication technologies and give them meaning in the context of their everyday lives” (Madianou, Longboa, & Ong, 2015, p. 3025). Moreover, even if the researcher includes the participants in the process by providing participants with digital tools, at times the participants are *instructed* as what to film instead of taking an active, leading role in the data collection. As Madianou, Longboa, and Ong (p. 3022) said: “new communication technologies are recognized as facilitators for voice and participation.” Thus, research shifts from a static researcher-controlled data collection perspective to co-constructed research practice. Consequently, utilizing mobile digital technology appears to be a strategy to overcome this predicament.

The new participant created data highlighted the role played in the study through participant videotaping and sharing of digital data online. As Hallet argues, “ethnographers should be open to following participants and issues beyond predetermined parameters” (Hallet, 2014, p. 312). Moreover, with the advent of social media and digital devices the idea of data can be extracted from a variety of modalities. Therefore, digital devices can become an affordance to both the researchers and the participants as it provides greater voice in the overall ethnographic research process. In addition, there is a new ontological approach to research and learning. One which positions it as central and knowledge as a tool to create, design, and communication in a collaborative fashion rather individually as seen in the 20th century.

Findings 1: Participant-Led Data Collection

Family members witnessing their children embracing and succeeding in new practices enabled a shift in their attitudes. It led to parents digitally recording the sessions. This first began, when one of the mothers recorded her child, successfully participating in the roleplay of a story, with her phone. Other family members saw her video and then asked for it to be shared. They created a WhatsApp community group, YouTube channel, and later a VKontact page (Russian version of Facebook). After this event, other family members began to record their children. Additionally, due to them sharing these videos with each other, they also began to videotape moments of the children from other families. While some parents solely recorded their child, others captured the whole event with all the children and other family member's reactions.

With this simple unscripted act, the participants co-created research data. This raised a question for the researchers in what ways, if at all, does utilizing digital and mobile technologies affect participants' roles? It became apparent that if we had only used videotaping from the researchers, the data would not be as deep and multifaceted. It also allowed us the researchers to enter spaces both on and off line that could engage in process of mutual learning (Højholt & Kousholt, 2009). This is important as Pauwels states that "participatory techniques...research should also benefit those who are subjected to it" (2015, p. 96). This deeper understanding allowing participants to co-construct data was revealed after reviewing the digital data. It was noted that each of the family videos shared provided not only learning but also some unexpected research findings. Moreover, giving participants space in the research provided a comfort level that created a deeper understanding past superficial interviewed responses. "Participant co-observation through digital devices, "allowed us to develop long term rapport, trust, and empathy over one year to get a deep and "thick" understanding of questions of power and voice" (Madianou, Longboan, & Ong, p. 3027). Moreover, the participants creating of what they believed to be important which gave them a voice.

Findings 2: Participant Voice

An example of this was when a grandmother played with the puppet and put on a funny voice to entertain her grandchild. This moment displays a shift seen with the elderly family members during the literacy events. At first, they remained in the background only interacting when trying to encourage their grandchildren to repeat a word. This recitation of language is a very Soviet educational literacy practice (rote memorization of poems). However, as the sessions continued, and the elderly participants witnessed the young children's enthusiasm and learning they began to interact in a more social literacy practice. The voice the grandmother used was not for formal literacy learning but rather to engage and interact with her grandchildren. During the videotape created in the home by the parents, we see the grandmother playing with the puppet and using a voice. In addition, it is witnessed the grandmother describing to her grandchildren the importance of certain artefactual representations (a photo of a traditional Kazakh symbol and picture of an eagle). This interaction gave voice and told us what literacy practices were socio-culturally important. This moment wouldn't have been captured if the grandmother hadn't privately videotaped it. This knowledge was created not from the research collected data but instead from the informal participant digital collection. It came from in when the families taped home social literacy practices. "As ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories." (Murthy, 2008, p. 838).

Findings 3: Equity in Knowledge Sharing

Using videotaping of these sessions, and through constant utilization of mobile devices, we discovered new aspects of family language ideology and practices. For example, during interviews some participants stated a nationalistic, Kazakh family language policy in their home. Yet evidence taken from iPhone, iPad and other tablets revealed that many participants, who were intent on only using Kazakh, would in discussion transition within the language practice to speaking Russian when they were interacting with their children. This led researchers to investigate deeper variations within the follow-up semi-structured interviews and videotaped sessions. The most illuminating and unexpected result came not from the videos we taped but from the digital data the participants constructed.

We observed additional insights during the viewing of family videos from the original study. For example, we saw a mother of a girl began to actively engage in her daughter's activity. Post-session observations overheard from one of the digital recordings with the graduate student/researcher: The grandparents asked "please send the videotapes of the session. We want to try this at home!" These types of unexpected digital moments enabled the researchers to get a deeper understanding of how the sessions impacted them. It would not be possible to give a quantitative survey to garner the same findings. There are three ways in which co-production creates deeper understanding of the participants' context and provides a space for their voice to be communicated. The first way was through peripheral recordings of participants, by the participants. A second way was captured during a break in the activities. The family members shift in attitudes were revealed. Finally, a third way was through co-participation through mobile recording actual beliefs of participants were revealed. The three examples of how allowing co-participation through digital technology was shared created a deeper understanding of actual beliefs and shifts in attitudes that might otherwise be kept hidden to researchers.

Findings 4: Participant Shared Revelations

Peripheral social interactions were revealed, only through the co-participatory shared mobile videos the participants created. This was because, the official recordings by the researchers were concentrated on capturing the group activity whereas these other recordings centered on specific children. The families started to share their recordings with each other and one peripheral practice was observed when a grandmother told an historical narrative and audiotaped it using her cell phone. She helped her granddaughter create the story. When we were examining the participants' digital recording one of the Kazakh language lecturers overheard the other grandmother's conversation, which was not visually seen in the recording. Rather the conversation was picked up in the background. The Kazakh lecturer said "the grandmother... you cannot see her she is off camera...but she is talking about symbols and colours that connect to Kazakh culture. I think this is important. She is sharing her knowledge." This mediation of knowledge did not occur in the researcher's digital recording, as it was a later conversation. This would have been missed if we only utilized research constructed data rather than also utilizing participant constructed digital data.

The second form of mobile data the participants co-constructed in the original study was taken during break times. These moments were incidental but revealed shifts in attitudes to literacy practices. For example, the father stated to another mother during a session "I never thought of my other children helping their little sister!" There was another comment from the mother in which she stated, "in school we are taught it is just about books not telling stories with family members." Another illuminating example came from an older mother. She helped her daughter even without being too proficient in computers. Later, she was overheard saying

“I do this at home now (because) this was easier than I imagined!” These moments would not have been captured just from observation or interviews as most of the observation was on actual activities and family reaction to the activities. Another participant took the videotape during a break. Many of the comments were made during breaks and after the main activities were completed. These were asides that provided rich participant co-created data.

A final crucial insight in the original study was revealed in the overt and covert realities of multilingual language policies at the family language policy level. This insight is termed as “intentional and unintentional” family language policies. The event was revealed only after comparing the official interview videos with that of the informal participant constructed literacy event recordings. The father was interviewed and stated explicitly and vehemently that his family language policy was Kazakh only with his 7-year-old daughter. However, after the interview the father began a computer story creation program. Another mother peripherally recorded the event while she filmed the whole event. Upon careful examination it was noted that the father participated in the computer story literacy event speaking solely in Russian to his daughter. This discourse choice was diametrically opposed to what had been stated one-minute prior. This was an example of intentional and unintentional family language practices. This incident was explained based on Kazakh having limited vocabulary in the area of technology.

Thus, through the participants utilizing mobile phones and tablets to share it was revealed that technology can contribute to Kazakhstan’s communities of learning (Barton & Tusting, 2005). Therefore, these videos were not just co-constructed research evidence but also learning resources for the community.

Conclusion: Changing Research Paradigms

In this article, we demonstrated a breaking of the fourth wall of research when participants became researchers, unexpectedly, co-constructing knowledge. We described how in using mobile technology, parents and grandparents unexpectedly documented their children’s participation in a research study engaging in both creating new data (e.g., videos, photos, online social media discussions) and new knowledge through sharing of the data with family members. The unexpected digital data allowed for enhanced equity between researcher and participant through breaking the fourth wall, hearing and seeing participant voice previously unavailable.

Furthermore, we have described how co-participatory research through the utilization of mobile devices, enabled parents and grandparents to document their children’s activities creating new data (e.g., videos, photos), knowledge, and gave voice through sharing of the data with family and community members. Using a co-participatory digital ethnographic approach, we explain how these unexpected digital data allowed for enhanced equity between researcher and participant through breaking the fourth wall, hearing and seeing participant voice previously unavailable. These new insights provide opportunities for other qualitative researchers to enhance their practices through an ontological shift, intentionally “breaking the fourth wall of research” to integrate participant co-construction of knowledge. We are proposing moving into a greater co-constructed dialogue between participants, observers, researchers, teachers, and community members with the use of digital technology used by participants during ethnographic observations. In the original study, we discovered how participant created data shared with community members created a shift in research paradigm and unexpected findings, thus “breaking the fourth wall of research.” Utilizing mobile technology that was co-constructed by the participants, in conjunction with social media sites facilitated comprehending research as a progression of co-constructed moments which allowed researchers greater depth of investigation. This study uncovered how the use of mobile

technology enabled all participants to collaboratively engage in ethnographic research (Dicks, Flewitt, Lancaster, & Pahl, 2011). However, this new digital data created by the participants highlighted for the researchers the co-constructing of a community of learning and greater insight from the participants' view. Consequently, we argue that a new approach of the technology utilized by participants facilitated breaking of the fourth wall and provided participant-led knowledge sharing and creation of unexpected revelations, to truly allow for the equity, voice to be heard through breaking of the fourth wall.

Therefore, research is moving beyond the vantage point of the researcher to a multi-participatory, multimodal approach. The videotaping in the later interviews filled out additional "spaces." The researchers obtained unintentional and unexpected data from the participants' active participation. The data extracted from videotaping by the participants shifted how ethnographic research is reconfigured but also the impact the shared knowledge and co-construction has on both participants and researchers. These participant-created digital recordings broke the fourth wall, and the behavior of the participants revealed a sense of their attitudes, practices, and beliefs. Our digital observations investigated the flow of cultural practices witnessed in the digital data from ethnic and local to globalize. We thus argue for re-imagining the traditional researcher-participant relationship, moving away from co-constructed researcher-led to co-constructed participant-led research, and the opportunities in breaking the fourth wall of research. Our findings provide insight for other qualitative researchers to enhance their practices through such an ontological shift, intentionally breaking the fourth wall of research to integrate participant co-construction of knowledge.

References

- Anders, P. L., Yaden, D. B., Jr., Da Silva Iddings, A. C., Katz, L., & Rogers, T. (2016). Entanglements, intensities, and becoming: Non-representational perspectives on literacy research. *Journal of Literacy Research, 48*(3), 255-257.
- Atkinson P., Delamont S., & Housley W. (2008). *Contours of culture: Complex ethnography and the ethnography of complexity*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman Altamira.
- Banks, S., Armstrong, A., Booth, M., Brown, G., Carter, K., Clarkson, M., & Russell, A. (2014). Using co-inquiry to study co-inquiry: Community-university perspectives on research. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, 7*, 37-47.
- Barton, T., & Tusting, K. (2005). *Beyond communities of practice: Language power and social context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bell, D. (2008). *Theories of performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bell, D., & Pahl, K. (2017). Co-production: Towards a utopian approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 21*(1), 105-117.
- Chimirri, N. A., (2015). Designing psychological co-research of emancipatory-technical relevance across age thresholds. *Outlines-Critical Practice Studies, 16*(2), 26-51.
- Coghlan, D., & Brydon-Miller, M. (Eds.). (2014). *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multiliteracies": New literacies, new learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 4*(3), 164-195.
- Dave, B. (2007) *Kazakhstan-ethnicity, language and power*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dicks, B., Flewitt, R., Lancaster, L., & Pahl, K. (2011). Multimodality and ethnography: working at the intersection, *Qualitative Research, 11*(3), 227-237.
- Escott, H., & Pahl, K. (2017). Learning from Ninjas: Young people's films as a lens for an expanded view of literacy and language. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2017.1405911>

- Facer, K., & Pahl, K. (2017). *Valuing interdisciplinary collaborative research: Beyond impact*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Franks, M. (2009). Pockets of participation: Revisiting child-centered participation research. *Children and Society*, 25(1), 15-25.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *Presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Hallet, R. E., & Barber, K., (2014). Ethnographic research in a cyber era. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 43(4), 306-330.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hart, A., Davies, C., Aumann, K., Wenger, E., Aranda, K., Heaver, B., & Wolff, D. (2013). Mobilising knowledge in community-university partnerships: What does a community of practice approach contribute? *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016682477>
- Heath, S. B., & Street, B. (2008). *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Holden, M. T., & Lynch, P. (2004). Choosing the appropriate methodology: Understanding research philosophy. *The Marketing Review*, 4(4), 397-409.
- Højholt, C., & Kousholt, D. (2009). *Researching conduct of life across children's life contexts* [Presentation]. Paper presented at the 13th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, Nanjing, China.
- Kester, G. H. (2004). *Conversation pieces: Community + communication in modern art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Madianou, M., Longboan, L., & Ong, J. C., (2015). Finding a voice through humanitarian technologies? Communication technologies and participation in disaster recovery. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 3020-3028.
- Mitchell, C., & De Lange, N., (2011). *Community-based participatory video and social action in rural South Africa, the Sage handbook of visual research methods*. London, UK: Sage.
- Murthy, D. (2008). Digital ethnography: An examination of the use of new technologies for social research. *Sociology*, 42(5), 837-855.
- Pauwels, L. (2015). *Reframing visual social science: Towards a more visual sociology and anthropology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Paul, J. L., & Marfo, K., (2001). Preparation of educational researchers in philosophical foundations of inquiry. *Educational and Psychological Studies Faculty Publications*, 71(4), 525-547.
- Pink, S. (2008). "Mobilising visual ethnography: Making routes, making place and making images." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(3), 1-17.
- Taylor, C., & Hughes, C. (Eds.) (2016). *Post-human research practices in education*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Rogoff, B. (2008). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In P. F. Murphy, K. Hall, J. M. Soler (Eds.), *Pedagogy and practice: Culture and identities* (pp. 58-74). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rose, G. (2007). *Visual methodologies. An introduction to interpreting visual materials* (pp. 1-32). London, UK: Sage.
- Rowell, J. (2013). *Working with multimodality: Rethinking literacy in a digital age*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schwartz, M. (2010). Family language policy: Core issues of an emerging field. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 1(1), 171-192.

Wolgemuth, J. R., Erdil-Moody, Z., Opsal, T., Cross, J. E., Kaanta, T., Dickmann, E. M., & Colomer, S. (2015). Participants' experiences of the qualitative interview: Considering the importance of research paradigms. *Qualitative Research, 15*(3), 351-372.

Author Note

Nettie Boivin is an Associate Professor with Jyvaskyla University at the Centre for Applied Language Studies in Jyvaskyla, Finland. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: nettiethai@gmail.com.

A. S. CohenMiller is an Assistant Professor with Nazarbayev University at the Graduate School of Education in Astana, Kazakhstan. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: anna@cohenmiller.com.

Copyright 2018: Nettie Boivin, A. S. CohenMiller, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Boivin, N., & CohenMiller, A. S. (2018). Breaking the "fourth wall" in qualitative research: Participant-led digital data construction. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(3), 581-592. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss3/6>
