

Community-Centered Research Series:

Measuring What Matters

VIDEO AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH

Community-based research (by and for the community) is important in planning for meaningful and positive community change.



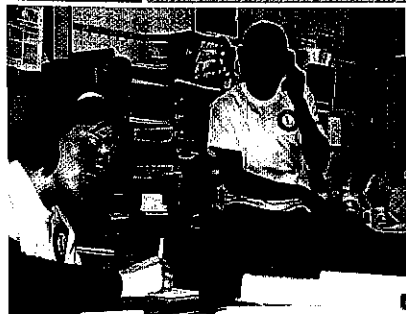
This type of research is not only desirable, it is feasible.



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A publication of the
**Western Rural
Development Center**
Logan, UT



VIDEO AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH

by Dr. Lorie Higgins, *University of Idaho*

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, as a graduate student doing field research on environmental activism in the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, I and a colleague, Andrea Brandenburg, used cameras to facilitate the interview process. About a week before scheduled interviews we gave participants cameras and instructions to “create a photo essay about what it means for you to be someone who cares about the environment,” and keep a list of pictures taken. When we met again to conduct the interviews we used the photo list to structure the process; we simply asked participants about the photos they took—what ideas they were trying to convey, and their reasons for choosing their subject matter.

Using this method of “autophotography” (Ziller, 1990) we discovered facets of rural environmentalism we would not have uncovered using conventional research methods. Perhaps our most intriguing discovery was the transformative power of the medium of photography. Research subjects with cameras become research partners who have some measure of control over the interview process. Instead of coming as passive responders, our participants came ready to convey details of their lives,

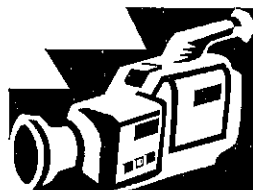
ideas, and physical environments. They also took us to special places, presented us with various materials, and invited us to participate in events that represented important aspects of their life-ways. Their revelations freed us of many of our preconceived ideas about what it means to be an activist in a “protected” rural landscape such as the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, and we came away from the interview process with a more accurate and richer understanding of their worlds. Participants reported that the process had been gratifying to them as well, and had stimulated new ideas and enhanced their self-awareness and sense of direction.

In the next few years Andrea and I became involved in community-based collaboration on natural resource issues—Andrea as a practitioner and I as a researcher. Our instructive experience with photography made us wonder how it might be used as a tool for facilitating cooperative learning, decision-making, and community development. Later, as technology advanced and became more affordable, we began thinking about how video might be used, perhaps in combination with photography, for participatory community-centered research.

Currently we are both in the midst of community-centered video projects. In

Lander, Wyoming, Andrea is facilitating creation of a community video by local high school students. In north central Idaho I am finishing a pilot project exploring the use of video for community development and research among family farmers. Unlike Andrea’s community video project in Lander, in which a group of students design and direct the project, choose subjects, and interview Lander residents, the Idaho project involves bringing together participants to direct the content of their own video. After I interviewed participating family farmers individually on video, they came together to interact and jointly determine the focus of their video. The purpose of creating a pilot, rather than a full-length documentary, was to allow exploration of different strategies for creating a participatory video. It is also hoped that the sample video will stimulate potential funder’s interest in an expanded project.

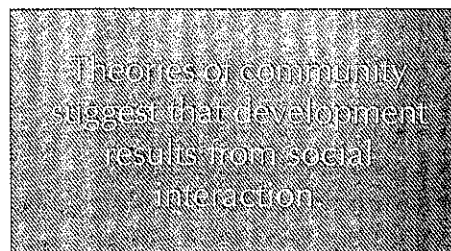
This paper describes the rationale for a participatory approach. It details project phases, key findings, and lessons learned in the process. The project is currently in the post-production editing phase, with completion of the pilot anticipated in 2003.



UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

One premise underlying use of a participatory and visual approach stems from the fact that with many social issues (such as land use planning and the decline of family farming and rural communities), stakeholders with different interests and values assume themselves to be located on different sides. This can lead to social distance, which inhibits dialogue and constructive community development. In public lands debates, wilderness advocates and resource use advocates see themselves as having fundamentally different values and interests. Even while participating in collaborative planning efforts they feel some responsibility to promote and defend their respective interests. For farmers spread out across rural north central Idaho, production choices typically serve to create such divisions. Organic vegetable producers and conventional cow-calf operators do not see themselves as having common interests. Moreover, commodity grain producers belong to organizations such as the state or local Grain Growers Associations, ranchers belong to the Cattlemen’s Association, and so on. Compounded by spatial isolation from one another and the loss of services in small communities, most family operators have little opportunity to interact with a wide range of other farmers. The act of bringing farmers together to direct a participatory video provides just such an opportunity.

Theories of community suggest that community-centered activities result from social interaction (Wilkinson, 1991). Like so many rural areas



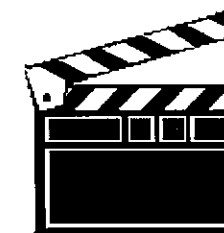
nationwide, rural north central Idaho has experienced farm population decline due to changes in farm practices and policies. Population shifts, school consolidation, and shrinking services result in decreased social interaction. This project is based on the hypothesis that bringing a diverse group of family farmers from different communities together to discuss the unique aspects of their operations, as well as common interests and concerns, has the potential to build community and establish relationships for meeting common needs.

The selection of family farmers as a social group was purposeful; in north central Idaho, farmers and the landscapes they maintain are the backbone of rural community life. Farming culture and heritage shaped the regional identity—and the open spaces valued by all residents. Moreover, family farming, though still a dominant economic and social force in Idaho, is in decline and not seen as a large part of the future economy of the region. As a research endeavor, this project seeks to understand the state of family farming, and how farmers themselves view it. As a community-centered effort the project offers family farmers a mechanism for acting on their knowledge.

A final premise, also related to the research component of this project, is that information about social issues is best generated by those who are most involved and affected. Who better to tell the story of someone’s life than that very person? Bringing a group of farmers together to tell their stories results in a weaving of multiple perspectives—a farming community narrative created by the community members themselves.

SCENE ONE, TAKE ONE

Pre-Production



The first step in this project was to enlist some professional assistance. Ludmilla Saskova (Lida), an experienced videographer living in north central Idaho, was available and interested in the project.

When the project was described to her, Lida instantly understood the intent and potential—and we began planning.

Because the end product would be a pilot video, only three farm families were selected to participate. One family was selected from each of the three essential types of farms in north central Idaho: commodity producers, hobby farmers, and alternative crop farmers. An additional criterion was that the participants must be from different communities.

After videotaping individual interviews we taped a focus group meeting at which the farmers became video co-directors. Our final production task would be to videotape whatever the group decided should be the focus of the video.

Production

The first farm family interview was with Lani and George Compton, so-called “hobby farmers.” Lani is the local county fair director and George is farm manager for the University of Idaho. Lani was known to Lida, which provided an “in” with her, and Lani was acquainted with many people involved in agriculture in the area, which gave her a unique perspective on farming issues. In addition to their full-time jobs, Lani and George have their own small cattle and hay operation near Deary, Idaho.

The second farm family interview was with Deirdre Rantz and Bill Dalton, who have an organic free-range egg farm near Princeton, Idaho. I was

acquainted with Deirdre through a previous work-related event, and she and Bill were chosen because of their divergence from conventional farming, their connection to the sustainable agriculture movement in the area, the physical distance of their farm from those of others in the project, and for their strong local ties (Bill Dalton is a third generation resident).

The third family lives near Kendrick, Idaho, and most closely fits the conventional description of a “farm family.” Carl Becker is the third generation to farm the ridge above Kendrick. His wife Barb assists, and his son Chris works closely with Carl. His German grandfather established the farm, starting out with 160 acres. Carl and Chris now farm about two thousand acres, which local wheat, pea and lentil farmers consider to be a small farm.

The first phase of production involved farm tours and videotaped sit-down interviews, which lasted from two to four hours. Discussion focused on what the farmers valued about their work, changes in farming over time, and the challenges they face as small farmers.

The second phase involved bringing the farmers together as a focus group to get acquainted, discuss ideas raised during the interviews, and decide the focus of the pilot video. With videotape rolling, dinner was served. After an hour of eating and visiting I facilitated a discussion in which we reviewed issues raised during individual site interviews, and discussed similarities and differences in responses. The remaining time was turned over to the farmers who, with me facilitating, discussed ideas for the focus of the video.

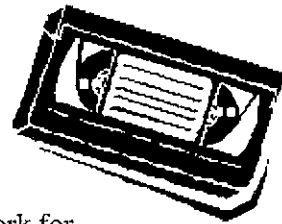
My intention was that the next step would be to transform the farmers’ collective vision into edited footage. However, my three subject families found meeting one another to share

ideas and experiences so rewarding they wanted to organize another gathering involving more farm families—and film it. Since my academic appointment includes extension responsibilities I agreed to help organize the second gathering. It was decided that the second event would not become part of the pilot video since it would extend the video beyond pilot length. Instead, the pilot would be used to create a sense of anticipation about subsequent gatherings. The farmers’ tentative plan is to hold biannual farm gatherings, rotating the location each time.

Post-Production

The post-production phase involved reviewing footage and cataloging every shot and its corresponding time code. Because this project had a dual purpose of community development and research, footage was also coded using an inductive, grounded theory approach to determining thematic categories. Once a strong familiarity with the footage was attained, numerous post-production meetings between the researcher and the director clarified the general framework for the edited result. Beginning, middle and end sequences were roughly outlined. This provided the researcher with guidance for selecting shots and sequences of shots for the “paper cut.” Farmers were not involved in this phase for several reasons. First, their schedules are such that finding time to meet and work was problematic. Second, because it was not feasible to provide compensation for the pilot, it was unreasonable to expect them to give up a great deal of time. Finally, early “rough cuts” are rougher than one might think; a great deal of familiarity with the footage is required in order to envision a final cut and identify additional shots or sequences to tell the story.

The farmer co-directors reviewed the resulting rough cut to ensure that the video tells the story as they intended. They liked it and felt it depicted their lives, farms and ideas for the video well, with one exception: there was not enough cow footage. Because the cow shots we had were of poor quality, addressing the problem required a trip with camera to Carl’s summer range. An outside reviewer was also invited to the showing to provide a fresh and unbiased perspective on how well the video conveyed the intended message. Once the editing suggestions were incorporated into the rough cut, an additional editor was contracted to render the final, polished version. Next the pilot will be previewed locally and presented in professional settings, setting the stage for expanding the project. I anticipate that the farmer participants, and perhaps other farmers attending the gatherings, will provide direction for expansion and extension of the project.



The pilot, expected to be 30 minutes in length, will introduce the farmers and their operations, describe the reasons for bringing them together on the video project, and show the meeting at which farmers discussed and decided the focus of the video (particularly the segments in which upcoming farmer gatherings are discussed).

New Knowledge and Community Development

Preliminary editing highlighted key themes that emerged from interviews and the focus group meeting. The findings of all participants—researchers and farmers—were summarized in visual format to produce a potentially valuable learning resource for other small farmers

involved in their own community development activities.

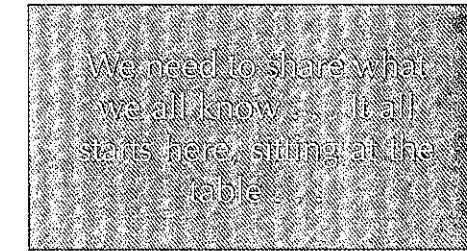
Whatever Happened to the Community Hall?

As film co-directors, the farmers chose the focus of the video. Given the range of ideas and issues raised during individual interviews, it is not surprising that I was unable to predict their choice. They might have opted to document one of the many social problems currently plaguing rural America by suggesting filmed interviews with policy-makers or consumers, or abandoned schoolhouses and closed-up storefronts in crumbling downtowns. Instead, they chose to create something new, or at least revive the community gatherings that this project made them realize have been absent in recent years. After interacting for about an hour the group easily agreed on a plan to organize a larger farm gathering, and the rest of the evening was spent discussing logistics. The following conversation fragments illustrate their motives.

We need to share what we all know . . . It all starts here, sitting at the table sharing a bowl of chili, finding out there is all this common stuff to all small farmers . . . I learned eight or ten things I didn't know before . . . Don't make it too structured or complicated. Don't call it a "workshop." I'm looking at this as relaxation. I don't want to get involved in one more organization.

This last comment elicited hearty nods. In the beginning some had suggested that the event be tied to formally organized groups or events, but in the end the group concluded that gatherings should be informal interaction—the sharing of food and information—and perhaps a presentation on the history of the host

community. Although no specific focus was selected, both the interviews and dinner table discussion raised a plethora of issues and common interests among these farmers. As such, these discussions reveal rich data about this sector of social life.



Chicken Talk

A surprise for me was the side topic of most interest to the group: chickens. Chickens turned out to be a common thread, and the group discussed the difference between “free-range” and “organic” eggs, and how to cook a chicken. For Deirdre and Bill chickens are a business, but also a labor of love. Their goal is to raise happy, healthy chickens, believing they produce the most nutritious eggs. Old hens are adopted out instead of being culled as stewing hens (much to George’s disappointment, as he claims old chickens make the best chicken and dumplings). For Carl, chickens have always been raised to provide the family (in his case, three generations living on the farm) with eggs and meat, while George and Lani have what they call “feral” chickens that were originally procured for the funeral of a poultry scientist from the University called “Chicken Charlie.”

Other themes that emerged during the individual interviews tended to fall into three categories:

- The value of the country lifestyle
- The importance of community
- The demise of rural communities and family farming

It's The Life . . . Style

During individual interviews each farmer expressed his or her affinity for life in the country. As George said, “I guess I can live here and drive into confusion.” People who live in town, he argues, can only get away to places they have to share with other urban “escapees.” However, each interviewee’s affinity for the country was multidimensional and might include a desire to live in a quiet and beautiful setting, desire to work with animals, or the personal rewards of producing good food. In one case, raising animals for 4-H projects was cited as an important service to the community. Thus, the desire for life in the country is bound up with attachments to places and types of settings as well as relationships with others. Carl, a third generation farmer and the only participant who has never lived off the farm, did not describe his affinity for country life in contrast with urban lifestyles. Unlike the others, he conveyed his deep sense of his place within the larger landscape, pointing out distant canyons and ridges that were indistinguishable to the interviewers.

Community

In general, people who live in remote rural areas are connected to life in larger nearby communities. All of the participants volunteer for schools, the county fair, their church, or as members of associations. Even though none of them actually lives in a town (each lives between five and ten miles from the nearest town), a sense of community is central to their understandings of themselves as farmers. This was especially well articulated by Lani and Dierdre. When asked why she farms Lani explained,

It's the community—the people you know that are doing the same thing you are . . . There's

just something about people who have been raised on the land . . . They just have a sense of value about them. They know responsibility . . . I'd like to see the clubs [service organizations, quilting groups, etc.] come back.

The Demise of Family Farms and Rural Communities

Topics at the forefront for most farmers include the declining ability of small farmers to compete in a global marketplace, and the loss of rural community schools, service organizations and vitality. On these topics Carl and George offered most of the policy points. When asked about the challenges faced by farmers and rural communities, George first pointed to government regulations.

You used to be able to put milk in a milk can and cream in a cream can, haul it into town and sell it. Well, you can't do that any more. You've got A dairies and B dairies and its all got to be inspected . . . So many restrictions on how to market your commodities that you raise. I think we have one creamery in this county. There used to be a creamery in pert near every town.

Carl argued that farm and economic policies—as well as market structures—are making it difficult for farmers to make a living.

Competition with free trade is the problem. We figure that we make about three cents an hour for the time we put into this . . . People we haul our product to seem to make money, but we have to ask how much they'll give us for it. It doesn't matter how much we put into it. It's because someone somewhere can make it cheaper. It's taking our markets away.

George also saw technological changes as part of the equation.

When we moved here, it seemed like harvest went on and on and on, but now you give them 10 days and they can have this country pretty well harvested with the new combines that they have, and the marketing. So it's easier to farm with more acres.

Thus, regulation, farm and economic policy, and changes in the physical processes of farming were all cited as reasons for the decline and fall of rural life. Dierdre and Bill, however, did not raise any of these issues. They focused on challenges that pertain primarily to operators attempting to identify and access niche markets for specialty foods. In addition, Dierdre argued that a common challenge of many small farmers is the ability to balance family and work. Farming is more than a full time job, especially when it is impossible to hire help and still make a profit. The egg operation requires someone to collect eggs every two hours—every day—from dawn till early evening, in addition to other chores such as feeding, watering, cleaning, bedding the chickens down at night, and washing, packing and delivering the eggs. Because of a family member's chronic illness, Dierdre and Bill have decided to give up the egg business for the time being.

Lack of public knowledge about farming was also discussed as a problem for farmers. Entrepreneurs like Dierdre and Bill count on consumer awareness; success for them depends on consumers being willing to pay more for food that is guaranteed to contain no chemical residues and is the product of happy, healthy chickens. Lani points to the county fair as an opportunity to educate people about agriculture.

DISCUSSION

Given the exploratory nature of this pilot project, it is premature to offer communities or other researchers a "how to" guide to creating a similar product. This is largely unexplored territory and as such, calls for other pioneers to venture forth and experiment with different levels of community participation, social settings, and data collection methods.

That said, resources that should be considered essential to any similar effort include funding for film-making expertise. I had visions of learning how to edit video on my computer, but given my other commitments was not able to do that. Similarly, both filming and creating a "paper cut" are not as straightforward as I originally thought. Lida Saskova guided the filming and created the edited pilot based on the shot choices the farmers and I made, and did so for much less than she might be paid for similar work in the private sector. Counting the in-kind services donated to this project, the pilot cost between \$10,000 and \$12,000 to make. Just over \$5,000 actually changed hands.

Time is the other resource essential to this work. In part, the choice of subject matter—family farming—lengthened the amount of time needed for this project. Family farmers have to plant and harvest when it is time to do so; they are their own labor force and have no spare time during these periods. Because different crops mature at different rates and the weather both determines planting and harvesting and is unpredictable, getting interviews with farmers takes patience and readiness to go at a moments notice. The editing process is also extremely time consuming and tedious. We had over 20 hours of footage that was eventually whittled down to 30 minutes. Three rough cut versions were produced, each taking a little less time than the last to complete. I

spent about 50 hours alone just watching the footage and cataloguing the shots, 30 hours in the editing process, 30 hours filming, and easily another 40 hours for project coordination and coordinating the many details involved in video creation.

A potential funding and expertise resource for communities is the Orton Family Foundation's "Community Video Project," designed to help rural communities with planning efforts (<http://www.orton.org/projects/communityVideo.asp>). Orton also offers a publication—a how-to guide called *Lights, Camera, Community Video: Engaging Citizens in Creating a Community Documentary and Vision*—which is based on the video-making experiences of five communities.

Though sometimes resource intensive, community-centered research brings many rewards, including a sense that one's work makes a difference. One of the most enlightening phases of this project occurred when I became comfortable with the fact that the ultimate outcome or shape of the "product" of this research is emergent. I have learned that had I not enlisted the farmers as co-directors, my vision of the world of farming and video documentary production might have brought about an entirely different outcome. Community-centered research means that the university researcher is not in absolute control—which is a difficult concept for those of us trained in the positivist tradition.

Moreover, community-centered research requires us to make decisions in a different sequence than we might otherwise. Open-ended projects are not commonly deemed legitimate in the social sciences. More than once I have felt pressured, by myself and colleagues with whom I have discussed the project, to have an answer to the questions, "Who is the audience?" and "What is the focus of

Community-centered research means that the university researcher is not in absolute control.

the video?" I still do not have precise answers except to say that I hope the video will be used by members of the farming community for their own purposes. At this time, that purpose is to enhance interaction among the scattered and diverse small farmers in north central Idaho. It remains to be seen what their vision for a full-length, extended project will be.

For Andrea Brandenburg's community video project in Lander, Wyoming, open-endedness is accepted without question. When projects are tied to formal research institutions, expectations tend to change. It is fortunate that among the ranks there are growing numbers of social scientists and institutions, such as the Rural Development Centers, that support expansion and exploration of the frontiers of community-centered research.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The *Measuring What Matters* series provides encouragement, support, and tools for communities engaged in self-assessment. It is a comprehensive road map for understanding 1) what community-centered research is, 2) what forms it might take, and 3) what it might accomplish. The authors have experience working with rural communities, knowledge of self-assessment principles and techniques, and a good sense of the issues rural communities face.

We encourage you to collect the entire series. Each issue is three-hole punched for easy storage in your own resource binder.

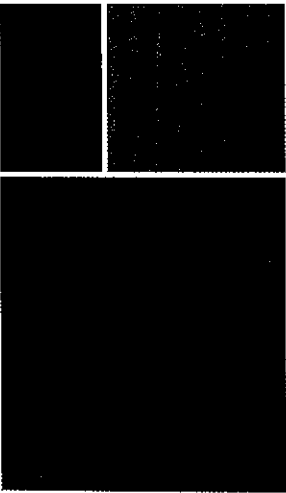
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