

Design-led research

Description

Design-led research seeks to understand the world through direct intervention by the researcher, rather than detached observation. Ethnographic study encourages participation by the researcher, getting involved, seeing what life is like from the point of view of the subject, and accepting that the presence of the researcher has an effect on the material under study (Garfinkel, 1967). Design-led research accepts these tenets of involvement, but actively deploys intervention as a research tool. This is arguably the strategy of the Surrealist artist in placing an object from one context into another in order to provoke a response or to reveal something new: an anvil on an ironing board, a violin in a shipwreck, a fish in a desert. The strategy is also deployed in musique concrete.

The design approach would be similar to the deliberate introduction by an anthropologist of a refrigerator, a mobile phone or a video camera into a community that had never before seen such devices, in order to elicit responses, reflections or evidence about family relations, the use of language, and attitudes to hygiene. The intervention can serve as a catalyst or an inhibitor that brings current practices into sharp relief and provides a focus for reflection and discussion. So the inhabitants of a remote village under study may not be forthcoming on the role of the visual image in their community until they see a video image of themselves. Anthropology is arguably inhibited from pursuing such approaches by a reluctance to impose change, and an ethical commitment to certain research practices. Not so design. Colleagues and I have developed an argument elsewhere of the value of devices and artifacts as a means of research, and for revealing something new about the environment into which they are placed (Coyne, et al., 2000). Subjecting participants to scenarios outside their usual experience reveals insights that could not easily be obtained by observation and interview alone.

A related research strategy is activity-based, requiring subjects to undertake a task which becomes an object of reflection, a familiar strategy in education, team-building, problem-solving, strategies to induce creative responses to issues (Groat, and Wang, 2002 p.120-121), and even entertainment. There are advantages to including design activity as part of a multimodal (triangulation) strategy. This might involve asking subjects to design, configure, and arrange objects and elements. The strategy here is to provide a medium in which people can be articulate without having initially to put matters into words. It also provides an environment for reflection and discussion.

A further design strategy familiar to those engaged in practice-led research is that afforded by design activity itself, as undertaken by the researcher, documented, and subjected to critique. In this case the creative output is integral to the research process, and may even constitute the main mode of communication within the research discourse.

The strong claim of practice-led research is that all research is practice-led. According to one commentator: "Research is a practice, writing is practice, doing science is practice, doing design is practice, making art is a practice" (Frayling, 1993 p.4). We could add that all research is a "creative practice." In this light we might be keen to consider practice-led research as integral to research programmes rather than a mode of research that is special and different.

References

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