Collaborative research and methodological decolonization with video cameras

Investigación colaborativa y decolonización metodológica con cámaras de video

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Abstract
This article reports the development of a collaborative research through the use of a participatory video methodology to document indigenous knowledge practices in southern Veracruz, Mexico. The case study describes the production of a video on livelihood practices with youth and how the process of the creation of the video took participants back to cultural experiences and environmental meaning-making. The dialogical work with participatory video enabled in depth insights that exemplified the knowledge within the context of fishing practices in local wetlands, a practice done mainly by women that had receded and was being lost in modern times. The study found that, on the one hand, it was the involvement in the participative development process of a documentary production and on the other, decolonial education processes (discussions amongst learners and fisher women) that surfaced much of the rich detail that then articulated into the local environment context and indigenous sustainability practices to enhance human wellbeing. The study found as well the relevance of the use of video cameras as a tool for the development of decolonial methodologies in social sciences research.

Keywords
Collaborative research, decolonial methodologies, participatory video, indigenous knowledge, environmental education, sustainability.

Resumen
El artículo reporta el desarrollo de una investigación colaborativa en donde se utilizó la metodología de video participativo como proceso educativo para documentar prácticas de conocimiento indígena en el sur de Veracruz, México. El estudio de caso describe la producción de un video documental con jóvenes indígenas y cómo el proceso de creación del video acercó a los participantes a conocer prácticas tradicionales locales y saberes socioambientales de la comunidad. El video participativo permitió documentar la pesca tradicional que se lleva a cabo en la comunidad, una actividad realizada principalmente por mujeres. El estudio encontró que el involucramiento de los jóvenes en la creación del video documental y el abordaje educativo decolonial a través del cual se realizó la colaboración, permitió a los jóvenes articularse con el contexto natural y la cultura local y valorar prácticas que buscan el bienestar humano. El estudio analiza también la relevancia del uso de cámaras de video como herramienta para el desarrollo de metodologías decoloniales en investigación en ciencias sociales.

Palabras clave
Investigación colaborativa, metodologías decoloniales, video participativo, conocimiento indígena, educación ambiental, sustentabilidad.

Introduction
In the academic field it is common to find research in which, through a variety of methods, we seek answers to questions that the researcher, almost always, poses from an individual perspective. In Social Sciences, these answers are usually obtained through questionnaires, interviews and observing people who are usually called informants; from the obtained answers and from the observed, the researcher develops an analysis with which subsequently generates conclusions and finally, an academic report. With the intention of questioning this practice rooted in academia, in the research that is reported here, it was sought, besides generating academic knowledge, to strengthen community processes through a collaborative approach. This was raised because it was assumed that few people who participate as informants in a research project actually benefit from a thesis or an article published in a scientific journal. Thus, this experience was developed seeking to transcend the scheme of researcher-investigated, subject-object, author-informant. A collaborative research (Leyva and
Speed, 2008; Rappaport and Ramos, 2005) and a reflexive one (Banks, 2010) was proposed, in which it was tried to analyze the relevance of the use of video cameras in terms of decolonization methodological practices of the academic tradition of social science research. It was assumed that these are, in themselves, daily colonizing practices and naturalized in rural or indigenous communities. In this regard, Dietz and Mateos (2011) argue that coloniality persists as one of the most widespread forms of domination in the world; so that recognizing the colonial character of Latin American societies will allow us to intuit the colonial character of its knowledge system, its knowledge and with it, the possibility of generating a “decoloniality” as an answer (Dietz and Mateos, 2011, pp. 60). The reflections in this text are generated from a process that sought to generate that decolonizing response through the use of video cameras as an alternative to research that only seeks to extract information from certain sociocultural contexts.

In this collaborative research was sought to generate knowledge that could be directly applicable to the context in which this knowledge was generated; Leyva and Speed (2008) conclude that in a collaborative research they face at least three interrelated problems that are present in many research projects:

1) that of the survival of the colonial burden of the social sciences and of the neocolonial nature of scientific research; 2) that of academic arrogance resulting from ‘indolent rationality’ […], which assumes that scientific knowledge is superior, more valuable than that produced by social actors; and (3) knowledge production policy, which includes, on the one hand, the interest and practice of producing knowledge that contributes to transform conditions of oppression, marginalization and exclusion of those studied and, on the other hand, the elaboration of academic analyses richer and deeper based on the experience of co-labor (Leyva and Speed, 2008, pp. 66-67).

The decolonization of research methodologies through collaborative projects introduces a perspective that leads to analyze the condition of the relations between colonizers and colonized (Dietz, 2011) through decolonizing strategies. In this sense, it is necessary to mention that coloniality is present in many of the areas that almost unconsciously produced and reproduced. In this regard, Dietz (2011) mentions that: “coloniality persists not as a political or administrative structure, but as a structure of the perception, conceptualization and practice of diversity.”
(pp. 58-59). Therefore, the present and persistence of coloniality in Latin America requires actions with ethical-political implications such as the need to foster a theorizing that emerges from the context itself, aimed at achieving decoloniality (Dietz, 2011).

In the search for an ethical-political congruence with the approach that gave support to the investigation (in the sense of promoting decolonization through the use of video cameras), this project was oriented to promote the discovery and recovery of culture, history, language and identity, with the aim of contributing to the recomposition of self-esteem and indigenous identity (Chilisa, 2012), as well as the local memory, through the use of participatory video strategy (Lunch and Lunch, 2006), following the principles of Rouch (1974) regarding shared anthropology. Thus, a research was proposed with two components: a) a management component that sought to promote what was mentioned; and b) an analytical component of what happened during this “management”, which contributed to the theoretical, conceptual and methodological debate of the fields of study of Environmental Education for Sustainability (Cf. González, 2001) and audiovisual anthropology (Cf. Grau, 2002).

The research was carried out in the community of Zaragoza, Veracruz, Mexico; this community, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (2010), has a total of 10,720 inhabitants. In terms of figures related to the indigenous population, the total number of speakers of the Nahua language is 3,401. The percentage of Nahua speakers in the community of Zaragoza is 31.72%, compared to 68.28% who are not speakers of the local language, meaning that the Nahua-speaking population in the community represents almost a third of the total population.

Methodology

Collaborative and Reflective Research

The research presented here was developed through a reflexive approach (Dietz, 2011) inspired by the ethnographic method in which video cameras were used as a strategy for documentation and audiovisual creation (Ardèvol, 1998). I understand by “reflexivity” the process of making explicit the values and experiences of the researcher that influence the decision making that guide a research process. From this perspective, who conducts
research is the main instrument of data collection and analysis. That is, the conscience of the researcher about himself is made explicit, “the carrying out of his research and the response to his presence; that is, the researcher recognizes and evaluates his or her own actions as well as those of others “(Banks, 2010, p.75). The reflectivity of the researcher is confronted with the reflexivity of the participants in the research process through interaction. This allows the emergence of a bilateral reflective situation that affects the actors involved in a research process such as the one described here and that is modified as the interaction becomes more complex by the cultural ways in which we confer meanings to social phenomena (Grau, 2002).

From this positioning, the methodology used in this research was purely qualitative. This qualitative approach had a humanistic character in the sense proposed by Plummer (1983): the focus of the study was the search for the subjective, the meanings and the feelings of the people involved in the process. In this qualitative approximation the classification of Gummesson (1991) on the hermeneutic paradigm was taken, in which it is mentioned that the researcher is an actor who also wants to experience within the phenomenon he is studying, therefore, he accepts the influence both of science and of personal experience to design, develop and generate interpretations around the fields of research he studies (Berg, 2007).

A key element of this research was the collaborative approach (Leyva and Speed, 2008; Rappaport and Ramos, 2005; Flores, 2012) from which it was raised. However, a collaborative approach to academic research proved to be a doubly complex task. First, because it was not only a question of making an “intervention” that contributes to solve a local problem based on proposals generated and evaluated from the involved groups (Smith, 1999), but through what happened in that intervention, sought to generate a research report that would be evaluated by an academic committee. In this sense, developing a research project that was based on an intervention work involved walking on two tracks and working on several levels. On the one hand, an intervention strategy was developed that was culturally relevant and that contributed to the strengthening of community processes in the sense of Smith (1999) and that, based on the obtained results, the need for which the intervention was designed (the production of a documentary video in collaboration with local youth) was met. On the other hand, the challenge of developing a theoretical and methodological strategy with which to generate
a document with the necessary characteristics to be evaluated by a scientific committee and with which an academic degree could be accessed.

What kind of collaborative work was the one that was developed and what was it that was wanted to achieve with it? The ethical-political positioning in relation to the generation and application of knowledge was a component that I wanted to respect and enforce. Although at the beginning of the process an academic project was proposed, the possibility that both the objectives and the methodological approach were discussed and negotiated with the actors with whom it was desired to collaborate was always open. At the outset, this strategy raised doubts as to the scientific rigor with which the proposal was proposed, since doctoral research experiences in which the student has to negotiate his proposal with local actors is not easily identified. From this point of view, in the process, there were no “objects of study”, but subjects who put their rules on the table, which became involved according to their interests. This involved developing a collaboration in which the least violent intervention possible and supported in a dialogue in which all voices could express their vision of the world from their own; it also implied making visible the asymmetries and promoting reciprocity between participants who share the same audiovisual project (Rouch, 1974).

Developing a collaborative research with an educational and political sense, is a strategy that, by generating knowledge about a reality and validating it in a participatory way, contributes the elements that in turn support it. We can not leave aside the discussion that the validation of this type of knowledge generation also implies the development of non-conventional validation criteria, which are evaluated according to the planned and achieved, based on the criteria designed by the own participants in relation to the carried out process. In this case, the following questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) were key to validate the research from a participatory perspective: What kind of research do we want to do? Who is the research done for? What will have changed once the investigation has been completed? Who will carry it out? How do we want to do the research? How will we know the research is relevant? Who will be the ultimate possessor of the investigation? Who will benefit?

To construct knowledge collectively in a collaborative research project like the one that was carried out, the main challenge was to articulate the different types of knowledge that converged in the context in which the research was developed. In this scenario, where the collective construction of knowledge was proposed through the use of video cameras, the subjects
that became involved took an active and participant role: the research was not restricted to the researcher, but all participants had the capacity to investigate and thus contribute from their own analysis to the answers that the research sought to respond. Following Rockwell (2009), this research attempted to document the “non-documented” of a specific social reality, through shared interpretive looks.

During the collaboration, a “research scenario” was generated and later analyzed. This “scenario” (the process of creating a participatory documentary) was co-constructed with the actors involved in the process. In this way, as a researcher, I did not come to inquire about a phenomenon that happened “naturally” in a context (as in the more classic ethnographic approach), but I built my “object of study” collaboratively with those “others” actors. In this sense, the results, products and reflections in this methodological dimension did not have an individual, but shared authorship. The materials produced (in audio and video) during the process consisting of a course-workshop, the planning strategy of the production process of the documentary video, the methodology for its design and its execution, as well as the learning and reflections around the process carried out, are owned by the collective that participated. I consider it pertinent to mention here the distinction between the type of knowledge that was generated in both dimensions: for the collaborative dimension, the knowledge generated was shared (of the collective) and, in the ethnographic dimension, individual (the researcher).

Video as an educational and research strategy

As already mentioned, the purpose of the collaborative research was to detonate a dialogue of knowledges (Leff, 2003) among community actors through the use of audiovisual technologies, particularly the use of video as an educational and research tool. The incorporation of the production process of a documentary and its use as an educational tool in the research project stemmed from several reasons. The first, because it was an express request made by a group of women from the community where they worked, whom I had approached to invite them to participate in the research project. They expressed that they would like to participate in the project giving some testimonies for a possible documentary and in the definition of the subject of the same, but not to participate directly in the equipment of production, shooting or editing of the same. In fact, the ladies did not want to collaborate
because they believed that such activities should be focused on the young and not on the elderly. The ladies were interested in collaborating on the project, but in an indirect way; were willing to give information about their knowledge, but that the ones to do the job of producing a movie had to be young people. The video as a product was not the object of study of the research, but to arrive at it, to construct it collectively from ideas of actors with different perspectives, opinions and experiences. In that sense, the dialogue to arrive at a definition of what type of video was required meant to promote discussions with a conceptual, political and aesthetic background, which represented a methodological challenge for the research, since they had to be shown and put into dialogue not only the ideas, but also the aesthetic perceptions and sensibilities of each of the participants in a culturally diverse context. The incorporation of the video in the project also emerged from the interviews that I had with some inhabitants of the community of Zaragoza, who showed me the importance of this to communicate their traditional knowledge with the new generations. It was common to hear that their knowledge is being lost and that it would be very important to recover it and show it to the young people to recognize their origins and their own culture.

On the other hand, I considered that the video could serve as a tool to record traditional knowledge that could show how local culture and ancestral knowledge contribute to the conservation of species and ecosystems without having to have contact with policies and initiatives related to sustainability coming mainly from the State or academic sectors. The justification for incorporating the video into the project emerged from the need to contribute to the empowerment of those who participated in the project, to disseminate knowledge and to demand environmental governance (Brenner, 2010) based on sustainable practices based mainly on local knowledge. In the same sense, it is necessary to mention that in the discipline of visual anthropology (Grau, 2002, Flores, 2012) I found important elements to question methodologically the role of the actor who video-documents aspects of the life of certain cultural groups as a way to do research (Ardèvol, 1998).

During the first field trips I went back to review the questions I had previously conceived that related to the existing knowledge in the community and the transmission of the same through the generations. Thus, as I was interested in identifying the ancestral knowledge related to the management of local ecosystems, I was also interested in knowing if this knowledge was
being transmitted between generations. If this were so, it would be important for the study to identify through which processes this transfer of knowledge of the elderly to young people occurred. The results of the application of a first interview questionnaire to local experts showed that, although there is still a presence in the community of people who have valuable knowledge, these are currently adult or elderly people who no longer carry out traditional activities such as fishing, due their age. On the other hand, I found that young people were no longer interested in knowing what their grandparents knew, as it was increasingly difficult to observe that the young people came to ask the grandparents about their own culture, their language or history of your community. It was perceived in the discourse that the young people of today are more interested in going out to the city instead of staying in their village and contributing to its development.

Course “Local knowledge and participatory video”

Based on the above, a call was made to young people from the community of Zaragoza to be integrated into the project and could participate in the design, production and dissemination of the video to be developed. As a result of this call, a group of ten participants was formed with which the collaboration was finally developed. With this group, a course-workshop was held on local knowledge, research techniques, film language, participatory video and video editing, which was called “Local knowledge and participative video” which had a total of 40 hours. In this one, aspects related to the planning of the production, technical aspects were worked and also, subjects related to the social and political relevance of the use of participatory video and the importance of the documentation of local knowledge in relation to the management of the territory were incorporated. In order to strengthen the work of data collection on community knowledge, and with this to outline the theme of the video documentary to be made, a session was held on research methods that included interview and participant observation, and on instruments for the field work as the questionnaire, photography and the use of video as a research method. Within the framework of this theme the young participants interviewed several community actors, which were collectively analyzed. We proceeded to listen to the audios of the interviews and to comment on the similarities between interviews and the relevant themes of their content, in order start outlining the script of the documentary. As a result of the analysis of the interviews, three possible themes were
identified: (1) young people’s view of traditional fishing today, i.e. showing that young people are no longer interested in this traditional activity because they have personal development perspectives related to pursuing a career; (2) the transformation of traditional fishing practices over time, i.e. showing how fishing was done in the past and how fishing is currently done; and 3) local legends about the relationship of fishing with the crocodile. Once the issues to be addressed in the documentary were established, the script was planned and the storyboard was structured in order to plan in detail each of the sequences and shots necessary to achieve during the shooting phase.

Once the structure of the sequences was defined, each participant chose between two and three sequences to direct, thus giving the opportunity to each participant to contribute their individual point of view to each of the selected sequences. During the filming it was possible to generate material corresponding to the planned sequences. Video interviews were conducted with traditional fishermen and students from the community. Sites of the community of Zaragoza were also documented, as well as preparations for the fishing and, finally, a fishing expedition realized by women of the community was documented. During the fishing effort, the women dedicated themselves to show their full experience and to share knowledge with the documentarists in terms of fishing technique and in terms of traditional knowledge and socio-environmental challenges associated with this activity. At the beginning, the young people were only involved in video-documenting the work, however, little by little they became interested in how the fishermen carried out their activities, leaving aside the camera and asking them to teach them to use the matayahual, the net in the form of hoop that they use to fish. As previously mentioned, the video-documentation of the fishing work was the last activity of the shooting. Once each director confirmed that he/she counted on the shots for each sequence, the shooting was concluded. We proceeded to review the material, analyzing the content in relation to the topic addressed and the technical quality of the material, such as audio and video aspects. After the material was analyzed, the post-production was planned and carried out. Thus, after approximately 40 hours of reflective work and training in the course-workshop, 40 hours of planning and shooting, 10 hours of recorded
material and more than 30 hours of post-production work, the first product of the course-workshop arose: the participatory documentary titled “The Heirs of Achaneh” (Sandoval et al., 2013)².

Analysis and results

In order to analyze the impact of the project, I return to the proposal of Smith (1999), who formulates a series of guiding principles for projects such as the one described here. These principles allow the visualization of differentiated, historically subordinate and politically non-aligned aspirations to hegemonic tendencies. Based on some principles of his proposal, a critical look at the results of the educational process in the framework of the production of the documentary video is analyzed. I am particularly interested in highlighting how young people, having participated in this process, transformed their perceptions regarding their community, their natural environment, their culture and their own capacity to organize.

Smith’s first principle is that of “intervening”. It implies that research is understood literally as the process of being proactive about change. In this sense, the community invites the project and defines its parameters. The institutions involved must be willing to change, redirect policies, design new programs and train their group differently. The intervention is aimed at changing the institutions that manage projects with indigenous peoples and not to change indigenous peoples so that they “fit” into the structures (1999, 145). In light of this first principle, I emphasize that management was developed as a permanent process of collective reflection on knowledge that has been displaced or invisibilized. The group of traditional fishermen and young people defined the parameters of the project. Under this logic, a role of coordination, negotiation and non-imposition of objectives was exercised. In this way, the positioning and the methodological strategy were oriented towards the reflection and, as far as possible, to the transformation of the structures and procedures that external actors propose/impose in the light of monocultural logics.

A second principle is “networking.” This way of operating has become an effective means to stimulate the flow of information. Creating networks

² Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS9BEyQxyTY
is to build knowledge based on relationships and connections. It is a way of establishing contacts between marginal communities. By definition, their marginalization excludes them from participating in the activities of non-indigenous hegemonic sectors that control forms and means of communication. Issues with a direct impact on indigenous communities, such as the Nagoya Protocol, have not been communicated in an efficient and culturally relevant way to indigenous peoples. These would have no knowledge of such agreements or their impact were it not for the power of networking. This principle is a process of building relationships and disseminating knowledge (Smith, 1999, p. 157). Returning to it, one result of the educational process was the generation and strengthening of local networks from the production of the documentary video. Its production allowed to generate new networks of collaboration of the young people for future audiovisual projects, as well as to strengthen the existing networks of the fishermen as collective. Networking has become an effective means of stimulating awareness of the environment and its problems, such as contamination of the lagoon where fishing operations are carried out, and thus raising awareness of issues of interest. The strengthening of local networks helped build knowledge based on relationships and connections. Now young people envision a potential strategy to establish contacts between nearby communities with common problems.

A third principle is “to create.” It refers to transcending the basic mode of survival through the use of a resource or capacity that every indigenous community has maintained through colonization: the ability to create and be creative (Smith 1999: 157). During the development of the documentary video different areas of creativity were manifested: on the one hand, the creation of a documentary, which in itself is already a product that safeguards the intangible knowledge that exists in the community. This knowledge not only “freezes” in time through an audiovisual strategy, but the exposed there shows practices and knowledge that indigenous communities create and reproduce in their daily work. In these knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples there are clues that can contribute to the construction of sustainable societies.

Another principle is to “name”, which means to rename the world using the original indigenous names, such as places (toponymy). This implies having control over meanings. For communities, there are realities that can only be named in the indigenous languages; there are concepts that cannot be
captured by other languages (Smith, 1999, pp. 157-158). Naming situations that appear in the documentary using indigenous words of the local language seems to me a wise thing in terms of the strengthening of the local culture. During the collective work, several indigenous concepts emerged that could be significant in the non-indigenous world. I will give an example: during the fishing activity, the fishermen speak among themselves, laugh out loud, make jokes, tell funny anecdotes and have fun, they distracted themselves. Tapuluhtiá is the name that they give to this activity of “recreating” outside the eyes of the spouses, the children and the community. One important reason to go fishing is, of course, the opportunity to supplement the family diet or gain some extra economic resources. However, fishing is not only done from an economic or food perspective. Although fishing was not good, just for the sake of recreation (tapuluhtiá), the journey, effort and time required to reach fishing sites are considered therapeutic activities that strengthen the bonds and cohesion among the women who participate in the work.

Thus, the results provide methodological clues for those interested in decolonizing the research practices that are developed in rural and indigenous contexts, having as central axis the educational and the strengthening of the cultural identity proper to the native peoples. In this way, not only knowledge was generated around knowledge and audiovisual production, but also helped to strengthen self-esteem, identity and organizational and decision-making capacities of those involved in the project.

Conclusions

In a collaborative process such as that carried out, learning was generated during the planning and implementation of the same and not only at the end. In this research, participatory strategies were used to plan, execute and evaluate the actions carried out. It is concluded that visibilizing and enhancing learning is elementary to be able to make a process meaningful and with it to be able to assess if it has been successful and relevant. A relevant aspect of the educational process in this experience was that the approximation and apprehension of reality is always more complex depending on the multiple visions involved in building multiple perspectives. In a collaborative process we learn from each other, we learn from the visions we have or have built in other contexts and in other experiences. However, learning together in a
collaborative approach is not easy; in many cases it is necessary to deconstruct certain statements that make this collective construction of knowledge difficult. Among these statements we find that the knowledge produced within the Eurocentric academic canons is often overestimated. That is to say, sometimes a block for a collaborative learning is the “unquestionable” character adjudicated to the theoretical, methodological and technical aspects generated in hegemonic institutions such as universities, international organizations, etc., related to the productive, pedagogical, with the cultural and the environmental. This blockage makes it invisible that in the local knowledge itself and in the experiences that take place outside academia and universities, there is also knowledge that may be relevant to solve problems that we face in our daily lives.

On the other hand, as a research with two methodological dimensions (ethnographic on the one hand and collaborative on the other), a reflective ethnographic work had to be carried out, in which a collective experience of intervention was analyzed. From the ethical-political positioning on which the proposal was based, what was sought on the one hand was to carry out a horizontal collaboration to help strengthen and re-evaluate the local indigenous identity; and on the other, questioning from the practice, hegemonic epistemological positions related to the generation of knowledge. What was analyzed in this research was not the “naturalness” of the social practices of a cultural group, but a process constructed in a collaborative way. This process was built on a collaboration in which the actors involved collectively generated inter-learning processes (Gasché, 2008). In these interactions, dialogues and negotiations, knowledge was generated that was relevant to the participants involved. Part of my role as a researcher was to identify, enhance and make visible these significant learning, in order to facilitate the construction of critical and propositional perspectives on community issues and strengths to the participants in the process. The use of video cameras as a decolonization practice allowed generating two types of products: the documentary video that is made and the learning that is generated during the creation process. In this sense, using video cameras in collaborative research allowed not only to document social practices but also to detonate relevant and relevant educational processes for the contexts in which they are generated. Video as a documentation tool and the design of audiovisual production projects are useful tools for the development of educational management projects in contexts of cultural diversity, as well as
being an area of great interest for young people living in rural communities and indigenous peoples as in which this experience was developed. The use of video cameras is a method that can give voice to the colonized (Chilisa, 2012) and direct their concerns in actions for social and environmental transformation. The systematization of the experience mentioned here provides methodological elements for educators interested in strengthening indigenous identity, reassessing and documenting traditional knowledge, and promoting the reappropriation of cultural aspects that are key to the sustainability of indigenous peoples. Educational management for the production of audiovisual materials is a strategy that can be used in diverse contexts, not only in rural communities, but also with actors from urban populations. In this experience, the work focused on the theme of traditional knowledge; nevertheless, this proposal of decolonizing pedagogy has the potential to be used in the light of other themes and with other age groups.

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