

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

When Eric met Sally: putting the drama into ethics teaching

Journal Item

How to cite:

Middleton, Dave (2009). When Eric met Sally: putting the drama into ethics teaching. *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, 1(3)

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 Taylor Francis.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.11120/elss.2009.01030009>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

When Eric met Sally: putting the drama into ethics teaching

Dave Middleton, The Open University

Note: Accompanying podcasts are available at www.eliss.org.uk

Abstract

This paper considers the use of a scripted drama in the teaching of ethics to postgraduate research students. The drama was developed as part of a suite of research training materials called *Doing Political Research*. These materials were developed with the purpose of using multimedia within an active learning environment. The paper argues that the approach is based on an appreciation of the role of film drama in teaching contexts. Whilst those who have used commercial films in their teaching have questioned the authenticity of the materials, it is argued that a specially scripted drama turns the relationship around. Instead of learning being implied through drama, the drama is constructed specifically to facilitate learning. This use of drama is based on aspects of role-play theory. Students are asked to empathise with the characters in the drama and to draw conclusions about the appropriateness of the characters' actions.

Keywords

drama, pedagogy, multimedia learning, research methods, ethics

Introduction

In this paper I would like to reflect on the experience of using an audio drama to teach research ethics to postgraduate politics students. This was an attempt at using a novel and entertaining approach to teaching a topic which, while interesting in its own right, can be relatively mundane when taught.

I will give some background to the project that contained the teaching – PARLE (Politics Active Research Learning Environment) – and discuss the use of multimedia materials in teaching more generally. However, most of this paper will concern itself with the process of producing a scripted drama for teaching purposes, including some excerpts from the material. The project's primary aim was to produce a portable learning resource. In the event, this was a DVD-rom called *Doing Political Research*. The short duration of the project (two and a half years), dominated as it was by the production of the materials, left little time for extensive evaluation.

In 2004 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) put out a bid for innovative teaching and learning projects in politics. The Open University, in collaboration with the universities of York and Huddersfield, submitted an ambitious bid to produce a suite of teaching materials for postgraduate research students. In January 2005, the £250,000 project commenced. The project was not without its difficulties and problems (for a discussion, see Middleton and Bridge, 2008), but, in the event, 13 tutorials based on the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) *Postgraduate Training Guidelines* (2000) were produced. The aim of the project was to provide an entertaining and stimulating learning experience for postgraduate students in a subject area that is often regarded as a chore by both students and lecturers.

The project team took a similar view to that of Adams (2001: 3): 'Research methods is one of the toughest teaching assignments in academia, but it can also be one of the most productive.' A number of different approaches were used to ensure that the 13 tutorials were interesting and entertaining. What follows is discussion of just one approach used as a way of bringing the ethics tutorial to life. Ethics is clearly important in research methods teaching, particularly in the context of universities' increasing fear that a failure to address ethical issues adequately could see them in the courts.

It is worth stating that none of the eight or so authors had worked on anything similar in the past. We quickly discovered that writing for an interactive medium was an entirely different approach to teaching than, for example, producing a textbook. Academics still tend to see their role as producing text, and the use of technology to enhance the learning experience is driven by technology rather than pedagogy. (I explore this in Middleton, forthcoming.) As Robberecht (2007) has pointed out, 'While the technical aspects of e-learning are often performed by technical personnel and instructional designers, such personnel do not have the pedagogical expertise of an experienced educator.'¹

The DVD was launched in June 2007, but not fully completed until September that year, just in time for the new academic year. By January 2008, six departments had signed up to the Research Training Consortium which was formed to continue the

¹ Whilst the substantive teaching was written in the main by academics with a background in research methods, the disc would not have got past the planning stage without the assistance of our sound and vision team of Liz Sugden (producer), Andrew Rix (editor) and software designer Geoff Austin. We owe them our thanks.

work started by the PARLE project (see www.DoingResearch.org).² In March 2008, telephone interviews were carried out with postgraduate students from five of the user departments (one student from each). In addition, 35 level 3 Open University students were asked to assess three of the tutorials on the disc, including that on ethics, for inclusion in an Open University master's course. Reference to these interviews and the written comments are included in this paper. Whilst I am happy to acknowledge that these lack a scientific basis (that is, they are not statistically significant in any way), they are, nonetheless, indicative of the responses from students who have used the resource so far.

Although the response has been overwhelmingly positive, one student remarked that they found the video sequences used in the ethics tutorial 'tedious'. On the other hand, the DVD's interactive approach has been praised. One master's-level student made the following observation: 'It was actually quite handy being able to take the DVD away and sit at home and just sort of look at it'; while a second-year PhD student endorsed the approach: 'You're almost like teaching yourself with what's on the disc. It seemed to me to be much better than somebody standing in front of the classroom and perhaps trying to, you know, explain something that you just know because you do it so much.'

Multimedia materials in teaching

Very often people are driven by a desire to use whatever the latest technology might be. Given that much technological innovation these days is web-based, it is tempting to say that it must have educational value. Academics have embraced a technology because it is there, rather than because it offers any great pedagogic advance.

² Subsequently a further four departments joined.

Others, of course, take a different view (see, for example, Bell et al., 2007; Salmon, 2005). Discussion forums, wikis and other online communication forms have all been heralded as new and innovative ways of producing education (from a growing literature, see, for example, Aspden and Helm, 2004; Thurston, 2005; Concannon et al., 2005; Kirkwood, 2003). However, their success in engaging students has been limited. We felt that, rather than using whatever technology happened to be flavour of the month, it was more important to provide an entertaining environment. We used a variety of approaches including video, audio and graphical interfaces. The disc continually prompts students to interact with a variety of interactive quizzes and games. Overall, the package appears to have hit its target. As one third-year PhD student enthused, 'fun is really important because research methods are such a boring topic'. She pointed out that, unless some 'fun' was put into research methods teaching, students were likely to lose interest very quickly. This is especially so for research students, for whom research methods can appear a chore compared to other aspects of their studies. Our aim, therefore, was to use the 'multi' in multimedia to enliven the teaching of research methods. These comments relate to the disc overall, rather than just to the ethics tutorial which is the focus of our attention in this paper.

Despite the fact that it remains a relatively new pedagogic approach, there has been a considerable amount of research on the use of multimedia learning (see, for example, Mayer, 1997; Tellez, 2007). Most research suggests that multimedia learning is beneficial. It allows students to engage with, and reflect upon, the learning materials without the pressure of a pace dictated by the fastest learners. However, whether this translates into quantifiable results is less clear. It is worth making this point as we are often asked what the effect of the DVD *Doing Political Research* is on the retention and completion rates of those using it. It's a good question, but one

without an answer given that the disc is only now in its second year of use and that the retention and completion rates on postgraduate degrees are likely to be affected by a multitude of variables, not least the motivation of students themselves.

Faced with the task of developing an innovative approach to research ethics teaching, we wanted to explore what the medium might allow. In the earliest drafts of the material the struggle to move beyond a text-based approach to learning was clearly evident. The tutorial was to consist of a series of screens, each containing text, an image and possibly – the ‘radical’ bit – a hyperlink to associated web resources. In this early version of the tutorial, the only real advantage of a web-based interface was the ability to move easily between ‘chunks’ of text.

The DVD, rather than being just a showcase of technological innovation, is steeped in what Bonwell and Eiser (1991) have called ‘active learning’. This is a method of delivery that aims to enliven students’ learning experience and their retention of key information. They state (1991: 2): ‘Active learning [can] be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing.’ One way in which teachers have tried to involve students in empathetic understanding is through role-play scenarios (for example, see Van Ments, 1983; Alexander and Dickson, 2006). In role play, students are asked to step into the shoes of ‘the other’ to explore their emotions and motivations in relation to a scenario which has been constructed to bring out specific learning points. As Druckner and Ebner (2008: 466) put it, ‘Learning objectives are thought to be accomplished by providing realistic, but controlled, environments in which students are guided only by implicit rules.’ The ethics tutorial, in common with other tutorials developed for *Doing Political Research*, was a form of active learning in that it was designed to involve students. The role-play element of empathising with another, in this case a student, was also

clearly evident. Students were not asked to 'play' the student or supervisor, although that would be an interesting approach to developing the material in the classroom. Rather, the drama was an opportunity for students to 'become more aware of their own roles and understand more clearly other people's points of view' (Van Ments, 1983: 30). Undergraduate evaluators were impressed with the approach, describing it as 'an excellent set of materials' and 'the best approach I've seen yet'. Whilst they enjoyed the drama, they also made reference to the interactive elements that were used to support and reinforce the learning.

Using audio-visual media in teaching

The use of drama as a medium for generating discussion in classroom situations is neither new nor innovative. Commercial films have been used by lecturers both to explore issues and to allow difficult or dangerous topics to be brought to life in the safety of the lecture theatre. Films have been used to teach organisational leadership (Barbour, 2006), English literature (Ostrander, 2003), medicine (Rosenstock, 2003), psychiatry (Sondheimer, 2000) and even political theory (Woodcock, 2006). The use of films allows educators to provide students with 'real' characters to empathise with. In using fiction to teach about conditions such as schizophrenia it can 'enhance empathy for patients and inspire interest in the illness' (Rosenstock, 2003: 119); whilst Zerby (2005: 29), who uses the 1950s film *Invaders From Mars* in his psychiatry teaching, claims: 'The medium of film allows for concise audiovisual depictions of a rich variety of subject matter.'

In clinical settings, film is often used as a means to generate discussion of particular conditions. The use of drama as a means to teach has, therefore, a long history.

There are, of course, limitations to using film as a proxy for real-life events or medical

conditions. Rosenstock (2003: 118) comments on the use of the highly successful film *A Beautiful Mind*:

Clinicians and trainees have wondered about the nature of some of John Nash's symptoms, since having fully formed, interactive, and associated visual and auditory hallucinations is relatively uncommon ... Although the movie is based on a true story, the director has admitted taking liberties for dramatic effect, raising doubt as to how much should be believed.

The sense that a drama is not real life may be important in teaching terms, but students seem able to enjoy the approach regardless of its artificiality. An undergraduate noted of the ethics tutorial: 'The end game of the story was a bit obvious and thus less valuable ... but very good fun.' A third-year PhD student, when asked to comment on the most useful parts of the DVD, picked out the ethics tutorial: 'I thought what was really interesting was the interviews between the PhD student and the professor.' Another undergraduate seemed to understand the role of the drama: 'The progression of Sally's study provided a framework in which to explore the complexities involved in ethics.' These remarks indicate that not only did students find the drama plausible, they also found it a stimulating approach to learning.

The use of multimedia materials to introduce contemporary debate has probably been used less in the social sciences, although Woodcock's (2006) use of *The Simpsons* TV programme to introduce political theory remains one of the most innovative. One use to which film has been put is in developing observation techniques for sociology students. Tan and Ko (2004) used two 'high quality' films, *Tokyo Story* (first released in 1953) and *How Green Was My Valley* (first released in

1941). The authors asked their research methods students to watch the films and observe age and gender interactions. The use of film, rather than sending students into the field for themselves, had definite advantages in teaching terms:

One reason is that members of the class are called upon to observe the same phenomenon. If students are sent into a variety of fieldwork situations, there are no checks, by either the instructors or fellow students, on what is being observed. Moreover, films provide a confined text that can be shown repeatedly, permitting one to replay scenes and analyze and discuss what has been observed.

(Tan and Ko, 2004: 116)

However, this advantage is offset by the artificiality of the film setting. The students understand, it seems, that this is drama and not an actual event which they are being asked to describe.

What I am describing is a situation where academics use the artefacts of popular culture in their teaching. However, when putting together the PARLE project, we decided to use a method that is less often used. In order to explore the main issues in research ethics, we were to use a scripted, but still fictional, audio drama between a research student and their supervisor. What we aimed to produce was a 'realistic' dialogue that would bring research ethics to life for the listener. Rather than finding teaching points within an existing drama, our approach was to construct the drama around the teaching.

When Eric met Sally

It may be of interest to briefly describe the way in which our fictional supervisor, Professor Eric Hafabee, and his postgraduate student, Sally Jenkins, came into being. As the PARLE project developed it was clear that we were devising an interface that was colourful, entertaining, interactive and educational. As each tutorial author developed their ideas for how their particular tutorial should look and feel, a number of devices were used. These included images, hyperlinks, drag and drop exercises (an early favourite), interactive quizzes, specially designed software games (eventually only used in the epistemology tutorial written by Stuart McAnulla) and some planned video content (for interviewing, focus groups and sampling). Not everything we tried in the early prototypes survived to the final cut. However, the variety of approaches used also provided a welcome difficulty. How exactly was each tutorial to be different to the others?

Having struggled to develop a text and image-based tutorial that covered all the important issues around political research ethics, I came to an important decision. The material was boring. Although it was possible to explore an issue such as the epistemology of ethics, it was difficult to do so in a way that maintained the interest of the reader. Or, at least, so I thought. Most academic writers will have experienced the feeling of inertia, or writer's block, as they struggle to translate their ideas onto paper (or, in most cases, a word-processing screen). On one such day, I decided to abandon my work for a walk in the park. (My dog is always grateful for these moments of self-doubt which leave me feeling unable to write anything!) As I walked, my head was still full of the material I wanted to introduce to the students. I began to imagine a student discussing ethics with their supervisor. What kind of questions

would they ask? And what kind of issues might they be faced with? During that walk Eric and Sally were born.

Initially, the plan had been to record a real discussion between a student and an academic. However, we quickly realised the danger of this approach. What if the questions asked by the student did not cover all the issues that we had identified? More important, what if the academic did not provide answers that covered the correct ground? Or, more likely, what if they had a particular view of ethics and were unwilling to deviate from it? The obvious answer to the student question problem was to furnish them with a set of questions which they had to ask and allow them to ask others as they felt appropriate. The academic answer problem was less easy to solve. Giving an academic written answers was likely to prove difficult, as no academic would want to be associated with answers with which they fundamentally disagreed. We were also concerned that a real dialogue might be marginally less interesting than an overheard conversation in the local post office.

It was at this point that I sat down and wrote a series of questions that we would want answered. But, as I did this, I began to imagine what the answers might look like. As I wrote the dialogue it began to resemble a script, and it was about this time that I took the decision to develop the script as an audio drama. So, instead of just a series of questions with answers, we were able to include discussions around the practical results of failing to take ethics seriously. The characters of Eric and Sally developed as a part of this process, and before I knew it most of the teaching was being produced through the use of a dramatisation of the errors made by a student in a fictional university.

There is little documented evidence of the use of specially scripted dramas in teaching. An exception is a report of the use of scripted drama to teach science. The authors note:

A conversation, whether scripted or those casual ones of daily life, offers opportunities for both expository and narrative features. Daily conversation, after all, has rules on maintaining a topic, negotiating meaning, and providing enough interest to continue. The best explications of knowledge should offer the same characteristics.

(Begoray and Stinner, 2005)

Students certainly supported a view that a scripted conversation could be an appropriate learning method. One undergraduate stated: 'The way ethics was presented by the videos and news flashes was very good. I found I really got into the story.' Another commented: 'I realise now that ethics is a minefield!'

Since the project team had no professional scriptwriters, the drama was scripted entirely by myself and a postgraduate student, Alexa Kellow (now conducting PhD research at the University of Southampton). We did not experience any significant problems in developing the drama, or for that matter in recording and editing it. In fact, both authors, I think it is true to say, found the process both enjoyable and exciting.

What we were trying to teach – our learning objectives

We were seeking to create a tutorial on ethics which not only covered the main issues but did so in a way that made it clear to students that ethics were an ‘essentially contested’ area of research practice.

Many textbooks treat research ethics as if they are an issue mainly for qualitative researchers. Oppenheimer (1992) in an otherwise excellent book on questionnaire design devotes precisely 150 words to the subject. This is essentially to warn would-be questionnaire designers that they should not harm their respondents nor coerce people into taking part in a study. Earl Babbie (1992) similarly devotes more attention to the ethics of experiments and field research than to questionnaires, although to be fair his exemplars include a questionnaire that was to be compulsorily given to students and the use of data collected from students that might later be published. However, interestingly, Babbie does not locate ethics within an epistemological tradition, but rather as a set of rules which researchers should follow. In other words, the politics of ethics are rather underplayed. Likewise, Neumann (2000) provides a list of dos and don’ts around ethical issues but does not locate these in any epistemological tradition. Whilst Tim May (2001) discusses deontology and consequentialism, he tends to view these as two ends of a bipolar relationship. For the would-be social researcher, therefore, the view is that you must sit within one of these camps. And it has to be said that, like positivism, deontology appears the least flexible of the two camps.

Influenced partly by Thrift’s (2003) chapter on Spinozan ethics, we sought to consciously undermine the view that ethics could either be reduced to a list of dos and don’ts or that researchers could easily fit into one of the bipolarised camps. We

were clear that the aim of a tutorial on ethics was to introduce students to the main issues whilst at the same time making it clear that ethics were themselves an object of contention. Issues such as harm avoidance are more complex in practice than portrayed in textbooks. The dialogue format enabled our concerns with the research literature to be voiced as the concerns of a student grappling with the complexity of the issues. This is illustrated by this clip where Eric and Sally are discussing the harm principle.

Sally

It seems to me that it's one thing if your research happens to hurt others and you couldn't have anticipated it, but it's another entirely to do research knowing that people will get hurt. I remember reading somewhere that in America in the 1930s doctors deliberately withheld treatment from black men who had syphilis so they could study their symptoms. Well, that's disgusting, I think, and goes over a line which shouldn't be crossed.

Professor Hafabee

Yeah, you're talking about the case in Tuskegee, Alabama, and you're quite right. It's become notorious as an example of racism and ethical considerations being ignored. In fact that case only came to light in 1972 and it was immediately followed by the setting up of a National Commission on Medical Ethics by the US Congress in 1973. But let me just be clear – are you saying that under no circumstances should harm ever come to a research subject?

Sally

No, not under any circumstances, because wouldn't that involve researchers having a crystal ball and being able to predict the future? If I could do that I wouldn't bother with research, I'd predict Saturday night's lottery numbers. [laughs]

Professor Hafabee

Absolutely. [laughs]

Sally

No, no, my view is that we should not knowingly do anything to cause harm to others.

Professor Hafabee

OK, I think at this point we've agreed that research ethics are more difficult than they may at first sight appear. At the practical level that's certainly the case, and as you start to collect your data you'll perhaps need to revisit some of the issues we've been discussing.

As this clip shows, we were keen to air the discussion, whilst at the same time including factual information. We wanted to provide students with a sense of where the debate lies. We chose to do this by introducing three epistemological positions: the deontology of Kant, Mill's utilitarian consequentialism and Spinoza's emergent ethics. The important point here, as far as we were concerned, was that it is likely that most social researchers would lean towards one camp but still be influenced by the others. This was a deliberate move away from the more traditional approach to ethics as a dichotomous relationship between bipolar opposites.

We also set out to show that codes of ethics which are heavily influenced by the deontological tradition are themselves also designed to protect universities as much as, if not more than, researchers. The increasing codification of research ethics has been described as a 'straightjacket' by at least one senior academic (see *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 'Ethics guards are 'stifling' creativity', 25 August 2006).

In this next clip Sally has been persuaded away from the idea of a questionnaire. She meets a group called SPAT and decides that she will do covert research on them. However, in doing so, she simply takes an opportunity that presents itself, regardless of the obligation upon her to abide by university rules. In this clip we can see that Sally regards these rules as something of a nuisance, a position which many would-be researchers will no doubt identify with.

Professor Hafabee

Look Sally, I don't want you to take this the wrong way. I am pleased that you've shown this initiative, but I think I can see one small problem with what has happened I'm afraid.

Sally

Oh?

Professor Hafabee

You really should not be in the field, so to speak, without having got ethical approval. You have rather dived in, haven't you? I think it would be best if you just, well, just pulled back a little. Of course, it will need to go to the university ethics committee.

Sally

Will it? I had no idea; it's not like I'm doing proper research – all I've done is join a group, see how it goes.

Professor Hafabee

Well, hold on Sally, you can't have it both ways. You've just shown me your field notes and identified your key informant. Well, that rather sounds like proper research to me. I'm afraid you will have to submit this to the ethics committee.

Sally

[Resigned] Oh, no ... how long will that take?

Professor Hafabee

Oh, they meet every month. Actually, I'm on it and we have a meeting this afternoon, so the next one would be in a month's time.

Sally

I can't possibly wait that long.

Professor Hafabee

Well, you'll have to Sally. The procedures are there to protect everybody. The best option for you is to write your proposal, including the ethical issues, and why you feel you should do what I assume is going to be covert research, then wait for the committee to decide. Are you absolutely committed to doing field research?

Sally

Yeah, I think I am. To be honest, I never thought it would be this exciting.

We also wanted to make the point that ethics applies equally to every area of social research, not just field research. In the tutorial we wanted to make the point that the selection of a particular methodology is more than just a technical issue about how best to obtain the data you want. The choice of method is, at least in part, an epistemological question, and that is also an ethical choice. For example, epistemologically one may believe that only data collected in the field is valid data, but this then raises issues of deception, honesty and the researcher's place in the research process. All of these issues need to be dealt with and this was a point we were keen to make. Having made the point that all research methods have to deal with ethics, we then chose to place Sally in a field setting for maximum dramatic effect. This was as much a dramatic as a pedagogic decision. Despite our desire to explain that all methods have an ethical dimension, we took the soft option in going for a field setting where ethics is clearly problematic. In retrospect, we can now see that we could have retained the drama and used other methods as pegs to hang it on.

Finally, we wanted to ensure that students were aware that research is an essentially political as well as a moral act. How we treat others in the research process is important, but understanding the political nature of social research is perhaps even more so. By introducing this theme into the tutorial, we found ourselves dealing with issues such as university funding which remain potentially divisive and troublesome.

What was in the drama: the story

There is a tension between the 'drama', which keeps the listener interested, and the 'teaching', which is actually the point of the whole thing. As we developed the script, we began to have a clearer idea about the characters and the 'story'. Not everybody will agree that a story is an appropriate means of presenting material to students in higher education. This accusation was levelled at me at one seminar when an academic said that I was 'dumbing down' higher education by turning ethics into a soap opera. But stories can and do play an important role in our lives. As Ulich (1998: 33) has commented: 'Creating and interpreting stories is an activity that involves a conscious process of encoding and decoding, stimulating the "construction of meaning" in both storyteller and audience.' With our story we wanted students to be able to recognise the situatedness of Sally and to empathise with her character, but we also wanted students to reflect on (to decode) the meanings of her actions. In a sense, students were invited to empathise with Sally as a student but learn from the mistakes that she would make. But, equally, we wanted the story to be a story in its own right. We sought to create a piece of entertainment, albeit one grounded in a set of learning objectives. This meant that the dialogue had to seem 'real'. We worried constantly and perhaps obsessively about the realism of the characters, their dialogues and the situations we were inventing.

Despite our intention to create a drama worthy of the name, we never lost sight of why we were doing this. Being aware of what we wanted to teach was the first step in designing the tutorial. It is worth stressing this point, for although the decision to place Sally in the field was taken partly for dramatic reasons, even if we had not done so, we would have required a discussion about the role of ethics in field research.

Sally Jenkins (played by professional actor Harriet Carmichael) is a second-year PhD student in her mid-20s. She is passionate about her research and about the issues she cares about, but also displays a certain naivety which is useful in constructing a drama. Initially, the drama was to be played out as a set of conversations with her supervisor Professor Eric Hafabee (played by former Open University academic turned actor, Mike Bullivant). The early thoughts on the drama were that we would explore with Sally, through a series of conversations, the ethical dimension of social research. It was always intended that Sally would sink deeper and deeper into a quagmire of ethical decision making, although when we started writing the drama we had no real idea about how it would end or what would happen as it developed. We started with a list of learning objectives rather than a set of dramatic turns. This is important for, unlike the use of commercial films, we were not seeking teaching points in drama but rather constructing drama to illustrate teaching points. The open-endedness is evident in an early clip where Sally seeks advice from Eric. In this clip she is deferential and unsure of her own views.

Sally

Well, I think I could just do with some advice on where ethics fits in with my research. I'm worried that I may end up just using people for my own ends. I don't particularly want to do anything unethical.

Professor Hafabee

Of course you don't, and as far as I can see there is no danger of that at this stage. I think the best approach in these instances is to move away from the particular to the more general. Let's explore the ethics of research a little, shall we? Tell me, what would you regard as the main issue for researchers when it comes to ethics?

Sally

Um, well, well, in the lectures it seems we have a duty to make sure that no one is harmed by our research.

Professor Hafabee

Ok. So you're arguing for what we might term, in more technical language, a principle of harm avoidance in your research?

In this conversation Sally is presented as a keen student with a willingness to learn. She is, like many students, not entirely clear where her research is taking her. She has an interest in the animal rights movement and a suspicion that some sections of that movement may have links to extreme right groups. The point for Sally is how to investigate this problem. For Eric, as interested as he is in Sally's research question, he is also keen to explore with her the more technical side of doing research.

Initially, Sally intends to give a questionnaire to members of a group of animal rights activists that we called SPAT (Society for the Prevention of Animal Torture). The names were chosen deliberately to be fictional. Web searches were carried out to ensure that we were not accidentally using a real organisation. We had no desire to get sued! Sally's desire to use a questionnaire allows for a discussion of access and whether the data is likely to be reliable. Eventually ruling out either questionnaires or interviews, Sally decides that she should go into the field and conduct covert observation research. She easily joins SPAT and investigates its links to the more extreme CAT (Citizens Against Torture). But before embarking on her field research, Sally and Eric discuss the questionnaire as a possible means. In the next clip Eric –

ironically, given what happens later – leads Sally away from her initial enthusiasm for the questionnaire and toward a more qualitative approach.

Sally

Well, I'm not sure. I thought if I contacted a couple of the groups engaged in direct action that I could ask them to distribute the questionnaires to their members. I was going to put in a stamped addressed envelope, but have no way of identifying the group members, so they'd be totally anonymous. What do you think?

Professor Hafabee

Well, anonymity in this particular instance would certainly help. But I'm a little doubtful that the groups would want to distribute a questionnaire which could prove embarrassing for them later. You are intending to tell them what you are interested in?

Sally

I wasn't sure about that, but, even if I didn't, it would be obvious from the questions, wouldn't it? Do you think they'd co-operate?

Professor Hafabee

I think it's highly unlikely. And even if they do, how do you know that your sample is in any way representative? They could well filter the sample by only giving them to people whose histories they know to be spotless. But even if they were to distribute them to all their members, this is highly sensitive information. How can you guarantee that they'll tell the truth?

Sally

Yeah, I can see that there are going to be real problems with this. So do you think I should go back to the drawing board?

Professor Hafabee

No, I didn't say that. What I'm saying is that I'm by no means convinced that, given your research question, a questionnaire is the most viable method. Even if – and it is a big if – you manage to get them filled in, it's unlikely that they'll reveal the information that you're looking for. I think that if you're interested in these questions of political affiliations of animal rights activists you need to approach the question slightly, well, slightly differently.

Sally

What do you suggest?

Professor Hafabee

Well, of course Sally, this is your research so ultimately it's your decision. Have you ruled out the possibility of some interviews with members of the groups? I've always thought that if you want to know something, the best way is simply to ask. It might be possible to explore these links using a small sample of key informants and conducting in-depth interviews with them.

Sally

Yeah, but wouldn't the same issue apply as with the questionnaires? Wouldn't they only tell me what they want to hear?

The decision to infiltrate SPAT brings Sally into conflict with both her supervisor and the university. Initially, Sally has gone into the field without telling her supervisor that she intends to do so, and without gaining ethical permission from the university's ethics committee. Sally's impetuosity is shown by her reluctance to wait for permission, and seizing an opportunity she begins to attend SPAT meetings. A little implausibly Sally gets ethical permission to continue her research. Anne Grinyer (Lancaster University), our critical friend, pointed this out to us, but also noted that it was clearly a necessary dramatic device. Anne has written fairly extensively on research ethics (Grinyer, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007) and so we felt was a good person to have on board. In the event, her suggestions for change were relatively minor, but nonetheless incisive. In addition, in response to my constant concern about the authenticity of the drama, she wrote: 'The dialogue rings true; so as far as authenticity is concerned I am impressed' (personal email). When discussing the use of commercial films in teaching, we noted the importance of plausibility; but we took the view that, while it was unlikely that Sally's research would be given ethical approval, it was not impossible.

Once inside the group, Sally becomes friends with the leaders Alice and Spud and is desperate to verify her hypothesis that some SPAT members are members of right-wing groups. She is convinced that one member, Steven, is right wing and uses remarks of his to suggest that there is evidence of links to other more extreme groups. The evidence is highly circumstantial, but already we can see that for Sally the PhD is not to be merely a piece of research but something that packs a punch. As the research develops, Eric becomes concerned about Sally's lack of objectivity. From his perspective she begins to lose her focus on the group and rather becomes an advocate for their beliefs. Indeed, she begins to target her anger on a local

cosmetics company – Fragrencia – who the group believe is conducting animal testing.

The link to Fragrencia begins a sequence of events which result in Sally landing in jail. Fragrencia plays an important role as the story develops for it turns out that not only does the company conduct experiments on animals, it is also a funder of the university, and, in particular, of a chair in Sally and Eric's department. Told by Eric not to attend a demonstration by SPAT on college property, Sally finds it hard to avoid attending without losing her 'cover'. It is this demonstration that leads to a dramatic confrontation, part of which occurs in this clip.

Professor Hafabee

Oh, and what are you getting into now?

Sally

Well, you know I just said they've been targeting Fragrencia?

Professor Hafabee

Yes, I have some information about Fragrencia, actually, and I am not sure you'll be glad to hear but carry on ...

Sally

OK, well, apparently Fragrencia are going to be one of the organisations involved in a big meeting which is happening in Kentonville. The idea is obviously that they want to show what an ethical company they are and how socially responsible. The usual stuff really.

Professor Hafabee

Mmm ...

Sally

Well, at our meeting on Tuesday night, we decided to demonstrate outside the meeting. Spud said they wanted as many people to go as possible to really make an impact, and Alice got really into the idea and asked me straight out if I was gonna go.

Professor Hafabee

Right, Sally. I see, well ... so this is a demonstration against Fragrencia?

Sally

Well, not just them, there are other companies involved, but Fragrencia's the main one.

Professor Hafabee

And where is this demonstration?

Sally

Well, that's the funny bit really. It's here. Apparently they're having their meeting in the new conference centre.

Professor Hafabee

Sally, you cannot possibly be serious. You simply cannot be involved in a demonstration on university premises.

Sally

Why not? I thought the university supported free speech!

Professor Hafabee

[Distractedly] Yes, of course it does. Erm, this is going to be peaceful, isn't it? Oh my goodness, it would have to be Fragrencia. And it would have to be here.

Eric eventually convinces Sally that she should not go until he has had chance to speak to his head of department. However, Sally finds herself in a bind when members of the group turn up at her flat, so she attends with them. At the demonstration, a group of activists, including Sally, manage to breach the security and get inside the meeting. Once inside they simply make a lot of noise, but when the police arrive all escape with the exception of poor Sally who is taken to the local cells for the night. This turn of events means that Sally is loathe to continue her research and decides that a change of focus is required. Abandoning SPAT, Sally decides that she should investigate the links between Fragrencia and university funding. Eric himself comes under intense pressure from his head of department, Verity Strange, to prevent Sally from embarrassing the department by exposing its links with Fragrencia.

In this clip, following her night in the cells, Sally has realigned her research. Unable to find a link to right-wing organisations within SPAT, she decides to concentrate on the relationship between Fragrencia and the university. Although this would be an unlikely move in the circumstances, it allowed for an exploration of the role of funders in research. For obvious reasons the increasing commercialisation of university research is not an issue that gains much coverage in academic journals. But this

section allowed us to raise funding as an ethical issue while at the same time returning to the role of codes of ethics.

Sally

As I said, I'm sorry, but that doesn't change the fact that I simply don't agree. I realise that my conclusions about SPAT were tenuous, and that I should never have gone against your advice and gone to the demo, but that really isn't the issue now.

Professor Hafabee

No – you are right. The issue is not your past behaviour but your obligation to future researchers. The ethical guidelines, which you seem anxious to ignore, are very clear about the duty of a researcher to leave the field in a way in which others could return. If you were to upset Fragrencia, it could irrevocably damage relations with a very important funder.

Sally

I have read the guidelines, but when I studied these guidelines in research methods, it seemed to me that the obligation was to ensure good future relations with subjects, not with funders – who, I may add, aren't even my direct funders!

Professor Hafabee

Well, let's look them up shall we? I mean, where's that file?

Sally

Oh, no – you lent it to me, remember? I think I've got it with me. Here you are.

Professor Hafabee

Right, there's a relevant section in the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth guidelines, I think. Er – yeah, here it is. It's on page 7: 'Anthropologists bear responsibility for the good reputation of the discipline and its practitioners. In considering their methods, procedures, content and reporting of their enquiries, behaviour in the field and relations with research participants and field assistants they should therefore try to ensure that their activities will not jeopardise future research.'

Sally

Yeah, but it doesn't say, 'Do not report the dodgy dealings of unethical companies with universities', does it? In fact, let me have that file ... Er, yeah, er, here you are, the PSA guidelines specify that 'members have the responsibility not to engage in actions that impede the reasonable professional activities of colleagues'. Aren't you and Professor Strange impeding my reasonable professional activities if you prevent me from doing research just because it might be embarrassing for one of the university funders?

What we can also see in this clip is a process which will be familiar to many supervisors. The student has transformed from a state of awe with regard to their supervisor to a state where they feel perfectly able to confront them as an equal. In a sense this is a process all students go through, from being learner to teacher, which can be a confusing transformation for the student and an unsettling one for the supervisor. Normally, of course, such a transition would be welcome, but in this case it is hard not to feel some sympathy for Eric as his student hurtles out of his control at

breakneck speed. As he says in one sequence, 'Yes, I've had easier students to supervise.'

The drama reaches its conclusion as Sally receives information from an unidentified source. The material contains evidence that not only has Fragencia paid to prevent research which might embarrass it, but that one of the recipients is actually Eric's head of department, Verity Strange. Eric, at first entirely hostile to the use of what may well be stolen documents, becomes very interested when he realises who is named. Despite this, he tells Sally that this evidence cannot form part of her research and that she must remove all references to Fragencia.

Professor Hafabee

Uh, let's see: 'I read about your arrest. Here is some information that you might find useful. A friend' – well, I just can't believe this!!

Sally

I know! Isn't it strange! And the photocopied papers ...

Professor Hafabee

No, no, hang on a second Sally. These papers, you don't know where they're from – they're obviously stolen, possibly by a member of SPAT or CAT or whoever they are!

Sally

No, you don't know that Eric – it could be a whistle-blower from inside the organisation – I think that's a perfectly legitimate basis for research.

Professor Hafabee

But are you sure these papers are genuine? You have to be very careful using stolen papers, you know.

Sally

Well, maybe, but well, hang on a second, I found out that ...

Professor Hafabee

No, no Sally. I really don't think that you ...

Sally

[Having to speak over him, loudly] Eric, just take a look ...

Professor Hafabee

Sally, this is not amusing! And I do not want to see those documents, those *stolen* documents.

Sally

We don't know they are stolen, but they do seem to prove that Verity Strange has taken a huge amount of research money from Fragrencia – but has actually produced very little research.

Professor Hafabee

What? Hold on – give me those here. [Rustles through the papers] Good grief! Well, I never!

Concluding reflections

Whilst the evidence contained in this paper would not convince those who require statistical validity, it does support a more general claim that we would make. The use of a scripted drama is a viable and productive use of a multimedia learning environment. Drama is an effective way of delivering learning objectives in a way that is both entertaining and informative. The drama has to have a certain level of plausibility, but students are, on the whole, prepared to go along with the dramatic elements in order to access the learning on offer. Students are not naïve; they did not believe that we had secretly bugged the University of Kentonville. They understood fully that what they were listening to was a drama. The production values and the performance of the two main actors were such that it was not 'cringe-inducing'. Indeed, we would argue, it makes reasonable listening regardless of the teaching points made.

However, having said that, we were aware throughout that we were in the business of teaching not drama production, so the drama elements always had to have a teaching point. This is rather different from educators who have used commercial film to make teaching points. Here, the relationship between the film and the student is rather different. The film has been produced entirely independently of the classroom situation where it is being experienced. In this sense, the artificiality of the film is more apparent to the student and therefore perhaps more problematic. It is also the case that when using commercial films what will be seen by the student are the salient parts as decided by the teacher. This is rather different from the process of constructing a drama from scratch where the entire production is salient.

Drama has some, though not all, of the advantages of role play in that students are able to enter the lives of others from the position of observer, without intruding upon

those lives. Indeed, the lives of Eric and Sally were constructed to be observed. In this they have something in common with other fictional characters. Nevertheless, dramatic events can be brought to life without anybody being hurt, or embarrassed. Students are able to identify with the characters but at the same time are prompted to analyse those characters' actions and motivations without fear that the feelings of the characters will be unsettled. More important, the situations in which the characters find themselves are similar to those that may be faced by the students. The difficulties encountered by Sally may seem, to some students, unlikely to happen to them. But in thinking about the situations, students can learn that 'some aspects of behaviour, such as the development of good human relations, require specific skills' (Van Ments, 1983: 26). In this case, students will hopefully learn that ethics are more than just a set of technical requirements but are, in the words of one student, 'a minefield'.

If drama has rich potential in its ability to facilitate learning, the multimedia aspect of *Doing Political Research* provided the context for which this learning was to take place. A role play in a classroom or a discussion of a film is an event that might enliven a specific learning occasion. A DVD of resources has the added advantage of containing a number of elements of 'active learning'. Students do not just listen to the drama and then offer their opinions as to what has happened. The tutorial also contains a number of devices aimed at engaging the student, so that key points are reinforced and learning is achieved through active engagement with a range of materials including but not consisting only of the drama itself.

A final thought. The drama is only as good as the writing and production. The resources available to us during the PARLE project enabled the use of a professional production team and professional actors. They were able to bring the material to life.

The scriptwriting was a departure from normal academic practice. We feel we did a good job, although of course that is not our evaluation to make. Nevertheless, cost would be a factor in the use of scripted drama in the classroom setting, and the ability to write the script and keep it plausible whilst entertaining could be difficult for those with no particular interest or skill in that department. I have had the opportunity to develop other scripted dramas and the requirements of the drama are often in tension with the requirements of the teaching. For this reason, my view is that when using drama it is always necessary to be clear that the drama must be secondary to the learning objectives.

References

- Adams, G. (2001) 'Teaching undergraduate methods', *The Political Methodologist*, 10 (1).
- Alexander, J. and Dickson, M. (eds.) (2006) *Role Play: Distance Learning and the Teaching of Writing*, New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Aspden, L. and Helm, P. (2004) 'Making the connection in a blended learning environment', *Educational Media International*, 41 (3), pp. 245–52.
- Babbie, E. (1992) *The Practice of Social Research* (6th edn.), Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Barbour, J. D. (2006) 'Teaching organizational leadership through film', *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 10. Available at:
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3325/is_2_10/ai_n29284285.
- Begoray, D. L. and Stinner, A. (2005) 'Representing science through historical drama. Lord Kelvin and the Age of the Earth debate', *Science & Education*, 14, pp. 457–71.

- Bell, L., Pope, K., Peters, T. and Galik, B. (2007) 'Who's on third in second life? From Library 2.0 to Library 3-D', *Online* 31, No. 4, pp. 15–18. Available at: www.onlinemag.net.
- Bonwell, C. C. and Eison, J. A. (1991) 'Active learning: creating excitement in the classroom', *ERIC Digest*.
- Concannon, F., Flynn, A. and Campbell, M. (2005) 'What campus-based students think about the quality and benefits of e-learning', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36 (3), pp. 501–12.
- Druckman, D. and Ebner, N. (2008) 'Onstage or behind the scenes? Relative learning benefits of simulation', *Simulation & Gaming*, 39 (4), pp. 465–97.
- ESRC (2000) *Postgraduate Training Guidelines*, Swindon: ESRC.
- Grinyer, A. (2002) 'The anonymity of research participants: assumptions, ethics and practicalities', *Social Research Update*, 36, University of Surrey.
- Grinyer, A. (2004) 'The narrative correspondence method: what a follow up study can tell us about the longer-term effect on participants in emotionally demanding research', *Qualitative Health Research*, 14 (10), pp. 1326–41.
- Grinyer, A. (2005) 'Personal agendas in emotionally demanding research', *Social Research Update*, 46, University of Surrey.
- Grinyer, A. (2007) 'The ethics of internet usage in health and personal narratives research', *Social Research Update*, 49, University of Surrey.
- Kirkwood, A. (2003) 'Understanding independent learners' use of media technologies', *Open Learning*, 18 (2), pp. 155–75.
- May, T. (2001) *Social Research. Issues, Methods and Process* (3rd edn.), Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Mayer, R. E. (1997) 'Multimedia learning: are we asking the right questions?', *Educational Psychologist*, 32 (1), pp. 1–19.

- Middleton, D. (forthcoming) 'Putting the learning into e-learning', *European Political Science*.
- Middleton, D. and Bridge, K. (2008) 'Multimedia learning: lessons from the PARLE project', *European Political Science*, 7, pp. 144–52.
- Neuman W. L. (2000) *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (4th edn.), Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Oppenheimer, A. N. (1992) *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*, London: Pinter Publishers.
- Ostrander, T (2003) 'Applying film theory in teaching fiction', *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 7. Available at:
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Applying+film+theory+in+teaching+fiction.-a0107489378>.
- Robberecht, R. (2007) 'Interactive nonlinear learning environments', *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 5 (1), pp. 59–68. Available at: www.ejel.org.
- Rosenstock, J. (2003) 'Beyond *A Beautiful Mind*: film choices for teaching schizophrenia', *Academic Psychiatry*, 27 (2), pp. 117–22.
- Salmon, G. (2005) 'Flying not flapping: a strategic framework for e-learning and pedagogical innovation in higher education institutions', *ALT-J: Research in Learning Technology* 13 (3), pp. 201–18.
- Sondheimer, A. (2000) 'The life stories of children and adolescents using commercial films as teaching aids', *Academic Psychiatry*, 24 (4).
- Tan, J. and Ko, Y-C. (2004) 'Using feature films to teach observation in undergraduate research methods', *Teaching Sociology*, 32, pp. 109–18.
- Tellez, A. G. (2007) 'Authoring multimedia learning material using open standards and free software', *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*, 4 (4), pp. 192-9.

- Thrift, N. (2003) 'Practising ethics', in M. Pryke, G. Rose and S. Whatmore (eds.) *Using Social Theory: Thinking Through Research*, London: Sage Publications in association with the Open University.
- Thurston, A. (2005) 'Building online learning communities', *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 14 (3), pp. 353–69.
- Ulich, M. (1998) 'Taking a new look at cultural attitudes in multilingual settings: stories and storying in teacher training', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 29, pp. 25–39.
- Van Ments, M. (1983) *The Effective Use of Role Play: A Handbook for Teachers and Trainers*, London: Kogan Page.
- Woodcock, P. (2006) 'The polis of Springfield: *The Simpsons* and the teaching of political theory', *Politics*, 26 (3), pp. 192–9.
- Zerby, S. A. (2005) 'Using the science fiction film *Invaders From Mars* in a child psychiatry seminar', *Academic Psychiatry*, 29, pp. 316–21.

The author

Dave Middleton is a senior lecturer in the social sciences faculty at the Open University. He is also a director of the Research Training Consortium which developed from the HEFCE funded PARLE project and now includes 10 Universities from across the UK. Initially, a sociology graduate from Cardiff University, Dave obtained his PhD from University of London, Royal Holloway, and has published on the morality of respect as well as a developing interest in multi-media learning.