Researching "Slave Labour": An Experiment in Critical Pedagogy

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Aims and Background

Using terms such as "new slavery" and "slave labour" to describe employment relations in the twenty-first century can evoke historical continuity with the transatlantic slave trade and the enslavement of African people and their descendants in the Americas. Aware of this when we set about making this experimental video (see Figure 1) for teaching purposes, we were concerned with two sets of questions: first, how useful are terms like "new slavery" and "slave labour" for analyzing contemporary labour relations? Do the terms themselves have pernicious effects? How has this been debated by scholars? The second set of questions revolved around the research process itself, focusing on the often awkward and contradictory relations between researchers and people whose lives are being researched. Out of both sets of questions emerged a third connecting thread: what are the standpoints of people being researched regarding the use of categories such as "slave labour" – and does the literature take adequate account of these?

These are vital and complex questions that we kept encountering in our independent research projects in Brazil, India and the UK. In our role as university teachers, we wanted to find ways to engage students in the debates. The video is emphatically intended as a tool for teaching. We hope it complements substantive classroom discussions of "slave labour," grabbing students' attention in a way that additional lecturing might not. The dynamic tensions between researchers and people being researched might, we thought, be more effectively portrayed through moving images rather than text alone. We see such work as complementary to students' own reading of the research literature, rather than substituting for it, and envisage that it will be most successful with final-year undergraduate and graduate students.

A number of characters are inspired by participants in Siobhán's doctoral research, which included fieldwork in Brazil in 2008. Some of the dialogue consists of direct quotations from these participants, translated from Portuguese. Some of the dialogue is adapted from conversations and interviews with these participants. And some of the dialogue is invented. In a sense this video is therefore "based on a true story." While we are attempting to raise questions that emerge from our fieldwork experiences, this should not be thought of as presenting qualitative data in a literal way.

Although we hope that others may be able to use this particular video in the classroom, we are equally motivated to present this experimental work as a means of encouraging students and fellow teachers to experiment with such technology themselves. Rather than trying to produce a seamless movie exploring debates over use of the term "slave labour", we have created a series of scenes, each of which can stand alone, although there is a temporal logic to the sequence: pre-fieldwork, fieldwork, post-fieldwork. The scenes deliberately draw on the animation technology (explained below) in different ways to open out a variety of presentational possibilities. The initial version of the video used music clips during the title sequences. If you would like to view this version, please contact the authors by e-mail.

Technical Bits

Siobhán noticed videos using cartoon characters to discuss complex issues appearing on the internet, which had been made through the website www.xtranormal.com. The website allowed one to type in a script, choose some cartoon actors, and pretty easily make a video. Their tagline was "If you can type, you can make movies." Xtranormal also offered a free software package for download, which we used because it gave more flexibility than making the movies online. The version we initially used was called State, which was then replaced by Desktop. Xtranormal subsequently introduced specific tools for educators. Xtranormal is unfortunately no longer in operation. Other software packages, however, now offer similar functions. In the version we made with music clips, we used Audacity (free open source software). To add captions, we initially used

Windows Movie Maker software and VideoPad (the latter of which has both a commercial version and a free version for home use). Xtranormal has been used for teaching a range of other topics, and as a form of assignment; examples can easily be found via an internet search.

Figure 1.   Experimental video: *Researching "Slave Labour": An Experiment in Critical Pedagogy*. **Click on the photo to launch the video.**

Acknowledgments

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