

SHARING EXPERIENCE WORKSHOP: AUDIENCE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

There are a good number of different methodological traditions in audience research – each with its own benefits and problems. The following are not absolutely distinct, by any means, nor are they intended to be the ‘entire list’. But they cover most bases:

1. Survey questionnaires: working with some notion of a ‘sample’ or ‘samples’ and asking mainly closed multiple-choice questions in order to find patterns and distinctions.
2. Individual-focused strategies – interviews, diaries, recordings, studies of collections, etc: choosing interesting cases for close study.
3. Focus groups: getting together small groups with the aim of getting a dynamic of talk going which can bring ideas, assumptions, and criteria into view.
4. Observational/ethnographic strategies: watching naturally occurring activities of live audiences, to look at interactions, and real behaviours in situ.
5. Creative production strategies: getting people to make things (drawings, videos, interventions) in order to bring into the open their unspoken (perhaps unspeakable?) ideas.
6. Participant-observation/action-research: taking part in ways that are known in the groups being studied, and perhaps steering what takes place, in order to see and examine interactions, relationships, and outcomes.
7. Fan research: choosing and privileging those with high levels of engagement, on the principle that their involvements *matter* particularly.
8. Web-centred research: using the special opportunities of websites, discussion boards, etc, as places for kinds of talk and involvement.
9. Reception research: gathering and using wide ranges of naturally occurring materials (reviews, debates, commentaries, parodies, etc) in order to explore discursive frameworks.
10. Archival/historical research: locating particular surviving bodies of materials (usually documents of one kind or another) through which the engagements of particular past audiences can be traced.
11. Quali-quantitative: big surveys combining quantitative categorisations with opportunities for people to explain what those categories mean to them – leading to specific qualiquant modes of analysis.

We think none of these is in principle better or worse, in itself. Rather, it is a question of:

- a) what kinds of questions each one can answer;
- b) what implications (including ethical) each one has for the role, and participation of the researcher;
- c) what are the key issues in design and conduct in each case, and
- d) what are the most appropriate methods of analysis in each case?

We propose to let the discussion in the workshop work around these four questions.