

Engaging Zapotec Youth in Intergenerational Dialogue Through Participatory Video

Joshua Schwab Cartas (McGill University)

Don't preserve tradition, live it!

Taiiaike Alfred (1999)

Background

The Zapotec (we refer to ourselves as Binniza) like other Indigenous people are not a homogenous group, rather we are diverse and have multiple histories, dialects and identities. Historically Zapotecs people have been classified via dialects, which are divided into four geographical subgroups within the state of Oaxaca, that is the Sierra Norte, Valley Zapotec, Zapotec of the Southern Sierra, and Isthmus Zapotec. According to our elders however, we all come from one place, the Valley Oaxaca, or Lulá, the place where our first people were from—our ancestors, the Binnigulazáa. The Binnizá of today are carriers of a culture that began as early as 500 B.C, a cultural continuity of almost 2500 years. However, in my maternal grandparents community of Union Hidalgo or Rancho Gubiña, located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, this continuity is under threat due to the rapidly declining loss of our ancestral language, Diidxazá. According to the 2005 census of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography Mexico, of a population of approximately 12,000 people, only 7,453 in Rancho Gubiña spoke an Indigenous language, an alarming contrast to twenty years ago when our elders tell us that the entire community spoke either Zapotec or Hauve (another Indigenous language). As in In-

indigenous communities elsewhere, through television and networked devices such as smart phones, youth in the town are increasingly oriented towards global mass media and consumerism and away from the traditional culture of their elders. Because of their principal focus on elder speakers, initiatives to preserve Zapotec continue to fail to make the language relevant to youth. If we are unable to engage new generations as active speakers, our Zapotec language and way of life are at risk of becoming extinct within the next century.

History of the project and related projects

In 2001, I participated in the formation of a media collective along with other youth in our community called Binni Cubi (New People in Zapotec), and our goal was to work towards preserving our Zapotec lifeways in our community as well as actively engaging in them ourselves. Like many indigenous communities around the world who are fighting to preserve their distinct cultural identity and lifeways, our Zapotec media collective has explored a myriad of strategies over the past 11 years that incorporate various technologies, such as digital cameras, recorders and camcorders, all with the aim of preserving our cultural practices, histories and stories for future generations. In the midst of this process of documentation we had an experience that changed our understanding of our methodology as well as our position and identity within the process. An elder named Modesta Vicente came to us to record her gastronomical practices so that the community would have a record of her dish, tamales. While we imagined our role as solely documentation, as we recorded her she invited us into the process of preparing and cooking the tamales, teaching us the zapotec words as she went, so that we found ourselves

not just documenting, but learning experientially both her practices and our language. This changed many things for us as we found the distinction between documenter and practitioner fall away. When I looked for a home for this work in academia, I found a methodology known as Participatory Video Research (PVR) that created the space where this experiential approach could happen.. And when I started familiarizing myself with PVR under the guidance of my supervisor at McGill, Claudia Mitchell, I quickly realized that our autonomous process of taking the technology of camcorder video and shaping it as a tool for our community's needs was an essential element of PVR.

The GBS funded project

In many ways this GBS funded project is a continuation of our media collective's ongoing efforts to find the means to strengthen our Zapotec language and lifeways. It also marked the first phase of my 18 month PhD dissertation. Over the course of the dissertation I will initiate an intergenerational workshop on language and knowledge transfer with four components: a) participants will be introduced to using cellphones deliberately as an educational tool; b) I will facilitate workshop discussions in collaboration with elders on the linkage between language and local ancestral practices; c) I will lead training sessions on storyboarding and producing cellphone videos; d) participants will create their own on-site mini-documentaries about cultural practices. In this first GBS funded phase of four months I partnered with a member of a local language revitalization collective, Diidxa Stinu (Our language), along with elders, and together we were able to produce a series of three short documentaries focused on different aspect of community life and ancestral practices.



The first documentary, entitled Ranchu Gubiña Lidxi Na Adela (Mrs. Adela, daughter of Ranchu Gubiña), is a 14 minute short focused on the preparation of a traditional Zapotec staple known as guetabicunni (an oven baked tortilla) by Adela Carrasco an 85 year-old elder. In this short she is also

passing down her gastronomical practices to her 40 year old daughter Ruth Carrasco, who will be continuing the ancestral practice.

The second documentary, entitled Ta Pedro ne Guelaguidi (Don Pedro huarache maker), is 10 minutes and follows Don Pedro Sanchez, the last hand-made leather sandal maker (hauraches) in our community.



Huaraches have been an important part of traditional Zapotec regalia since pre-hispanic times and continue to be worn on a daily basis by both women and men. This short illustrates the entire process of making huaraches and Don Pedro explains how and why he learned this trade as well as why it is important to continue to preserve. The third documentary is entitled Ta Jesus ne guixhe (Mr. Jesus and his hammocks) is 15mins and recounts a day in the life of Jesus Alias and his family, his wife Lucila and son Jesus Bladimir Alias. The process of making hammocks is not only a way to support his family, but to continue this ancestral practice



that he learned from an elder and which he hopes his son will eventually learn. Moreover, part of this documentary was filmed by his son Jesus, and his nine year old grandson Jesus Alias, which giving this piece an interesting perspective.

As we see, his grandson understood all of his father's movements from watching him everyday. Interestingly enough, this small collaboration between myself and Jesus Jr. made him want to continue to film other aspects about his everyday life, such as his mother preparing beans or grandmother weaving. In other words, it proved that using a mobile device in a deliberate manner, in this case an ipod touch, can be not only a powerful catalyst for youth to begin looking at their own culture, but a powerful educational tool that could enable the transfer of both language and ancestral practices between generations.

Each documentary used only local musicians as for the background music, and was filmed in Zapotec to be translated later by the students in the workshops as part of their learning activities. In addition, these three documentaries will be screened at the casa de cultura (community house of culture) for the community to view and all the elders who participated in the making of the documentaries have agreed to be co-collaborators in the workshops, meaning they will be showing youth these practices while only speaking Zapotec, sharing language and practice experientially in the lived context.

This first phase has allowed me to make important contacts with members of the Rancho Gubiña board of education and together we are trying to implement this model of digital technology enhanced lived language education as a pilot program that could eventually be an fundamental part of the middle school and high school curriculum—and ultimately another important step in the ensuring the future of our Zapotec language.

