



Ideas in Action

# The making of 'Home Improvements—tools for working with families in Aotearoa/New Zealand'. Reflections on creating a video resource for teaching purposes

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**Abstract** *In this article, two social work practitioners explore, with all the wisdom of hindsight, the joys and pitfalls of venturing into video production as a medium for creating a teaching and learning resource. Their discoveries are organised under a number of key themes beginning with an idea and leading into commitment to a project involving a crew, a cast and a steep but captivating learning curve on the use of audio visual technology. Other practitioners similarly interested in the potential of this medium but without much experience, will find this article of great benefit in providing practical tips and insights, and demystifying the tasks and terminology associated with video production.*

## Introduction

After many years of teaching social work students in an educational setting, practice teachers Gwen Ellis and Mike Garland decided that there was a gap in teaching resources. Social workers and social work students were asking to see a demonstration of how experienced practitioners used knowledge and skills in working with families. In mid-1997, in response to this demand, the authors obtained a grant from the Massey University Fund for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching (FIET) to create a video teaching resource. We wanted to present family work skills from a range of cultural perspectives and therefore decided on a series of three videos which would include a Pakeha (European) approach, a Maori (indigenous Aotearoa/New Zealander) approach and a Pacific Island cultural approach, respectively.

This article chronologically describes the process of creating the first video about working with a European (Pakeha) family and is set out in the themes of: pre-filming; filming; post-production; and marketing. The intended audience for this article is diverse, ranging from practitioners and students to educators and service providers who may wish to embark on such a project.

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**Pre-filming—'It's all in the planning'**

After recovering from the surprise of being given funding for the project, we began to look at how we could turn our idea into action. We explored what similar resources were available and canvassed expressions of interest from our Maori and Pacific Island colleagues to be involved in the making of the other videos. We then entered into two partnerships, one with Outpost Digital Media (a local television production company) who would provide the technical and production resource, and one with the Diploma in Performing Arts at our local polytechnic who would provide the people resource. The decision to use acting students rather than social work students was a deliberate one in the interests of the quality of the acting. We then approached two very experienced family work practitioners to play themselves working with the family in the scenario that we were about to create. We recognised that this was a big undertaking, inviting practitioners to open their practice for critique from such a potentially wide audience.

In creating the scenario, we drew on both our practice and our experience in teaching social work students, skills for working with families. At the outset, we decided to steer away from issues that would not be best resolved working in a family setting. We chose a family with an acting-out teenager where the young person had become the focus of the problem. We then created character profiles and issues for each of the characters and constructed a genogram to visually portray the immediate and extended family, and some background information.

We initially envisaged using a scriptwriter and employed a person to offer us script writing advice. After our first meeting with the Director of Acting however, we cast caution to the wind and followed his advice to go instead with an unscripted process, relying on the actors to improvise and develop the characters under his guidance. This proved to be a very good decision.

The next steps were to meet with the family work practitioners to establish the process and teaching points we wanted demonstrated in the video and to begin the process of selecting the cast. We did this by meeting with students in the Diploma in Performing Arts course to outline the project. There was great enthusiasm for the project to the extent that we decided to develop an extra character to meet the demand for involvement. Soon after, we carried out auditions and a screen test in a local theatre and chose 'our family'. A fortnight later, rehearsals and character development commenced.

The Director of Acting set up scenarios involving sub-systems of the family which quickly saw the development of family culture and family dynamics. For example, we saw the development of parental concern about the teenager's behaviour; the siblings holding secrets between one another which the parents knew nothing about; and a humorous episode in the kitchen between mum and the kids which involved shrieking and breaking of crockery. In our last meeting with the actors before the filming, we endeavoured to warm them up as to what they could expect from a family counselling process. Practical considerations such as make up and bringing a change of clothes were also covered. Last but not least, the settings for the exterior and interior filming were secured and checked out by both the producers and the technical crew.

**Filming—'Getting it in the can'**

A full day was set aside for filming. The camera crew of five people arrived early to set up the equipment which included a lighting rig, three microphones and three cameras. Next to arrive were the actors and the practitioners. It was important to keep these two groups

separate to simulate a real life situation as much as possible. The actors interacted in role for most of the day including meal breaks. While being entertaining in itself, this also mirrored the work that continues between sessions for families going through a counselling process. It is worth noting here the prior advice from the Technical Director that 'a well fed crew is a happy crew', hence catering received the attention it deserved.

On the day, we were surprised by the lack of a need for re-takes (only once did this occur when a rescue helicopter took off over the top of the building in which filming was taking place, creating a totally surround sound experience). We believe this was due to a number of significant factors, including: the absence of a script; the time taken to develop the characters; the skills of the cast; the experience of the practitioners and the technical expertise of the crew. All of this contributed to what can only be described as spontaneous synergy on the day.

It is our view that in choosing an unscripted process you are taking a calculated risk (which paid off in our case). It is likely that you will end up with much more material than you will use in the final product but the benefits are that the flow is not interrupted and believable and real material is generated.

Once the interior filming was completed, we moved location to a residential street to carry out some exterior filming. The sequencing of this proved to be significant as we believe that the actors were able to communicate much more of their characters in that brief segment due to having been in role for the whole day up to that time. These shots conveyed attitudes, roles, dynamics and portrayed the family in their physical context.

#### **Post-production—'What you do with what you get'**

Once filming was accomplished, we naively thought that the project was well on the way to completion. We were to discover, however, that much like disseminating a major piece of research, as much work goes into the analysis and writing up, as into the fieldwork itself. We were faced with approximately two and a half hours of material to edit down to the 30 minutes video which we had originally intended to make! We discovered that editing, much like working through multiple drafts of written work, involves refining and distilling down the content; identifying key themes, ideas and segments; and making links between the selected clips so that they weave into a coherent narrative. This was done with input from the two family work practitioners who offered comments and suggestions. The editing process for us involved 15–20 hours work over five sessions, prior to then turning the video into a teaching resource of approximately 60 minutes in length. This production editing was a quite separate exercise to the technical editing undertaken by Outpost Digital Media, which operated as a parallel process and took many more hours again.

Most of our edits were carried out on only one camera angle (wide-angle). Once the actual content to be retained was decided, we then realised that the dramatic potential of the video would be enhanced by much greater use of close-ups and reaction shots of sub-systems, individual family members and the practitioners. This revealed more of the unspoken communication. Editing is a powerful process and we discovered that it is necessary to ensure that balance is achieved; for example, the input of each practitioner and contribution from family members, taking into account roles, gender and so on. To smooth the transition between edited segments, we sought linking statements, fade in and out points and utilised overdubs by a narrator.

Throughout, our focus had been on creating a teaching resource which highlighted both content and process which could be used by both students and practitioners to reflect on practice and enhance their skills. During the editing process, we looked through the video at

the events unfolding to pinpoint the skills which were being demonstrated and the discussion points which could be derived from what was happening on the screen. The content of the video consisted of two sessions with the family, preceded and followed by briefing and review sessions between the two social workers. Music and graphics were used to begin and end these segments.

From our research into other video resources, it became obvious that the potential of a teaching video could be significantly enhanced by the inclusion of a teaching resource booklet. The booklet included: suggestions for use; character profiles and issues; a family genogram and video support notes which comprised a time log, content, discussion points and skills demonstration. On screen, we included scrolled bullet points to signal key content and process as a way of encouraging active rather than passive viewing.

In both the video and the booklet, a high quality presentation was aimed for, opting for full colour on both the video and booklet covers. We also decided to make the booklet the same size as the video in light of seeing other resources where the presentation of accompanying support notes varied from the video and therefore did not look like an integrated package.

### **Marketing—‘Putting it out there’**

Those of you who are familiar with an experience of writing and publishing will identify with that moment where you decide this is it—this is the final product! We were satisfied that the video content achieved our teaching aims but having been so involved in the production, we felt that we had lost our objectivity and there was some apprehension as to how it would be received by our target audience. An official launch was planned. In spite of our best laid plans to have everything ready well before the day, in the event, last minute technical changes and production took us ‘down to the wire’. For this occasion, Outpost Digital Media produced a short promotional video with highlights. It was important for invited guests to get a real taste of the final product. A source of great interest and humour on the day of the launch was the way the actors who had played family members slipped back into role, giving almost the sense of a family reunion!

In terms of marketing the video, we had considered how to maximise sales and planned a multi-faceted strategy. Firstly, prior to publication, the making of the video had been publicised in our university newsletter leading to a feature article in a national newspaper. The second phase involved mail-outs to other teaching institutions, agencies and individuals (some of whom had heard about the video and expressed an interest), followed by flyer inserts into professional Social Work and Counselling newsletters and submission for review by a journal. Thirdly, we have publicised the video by developing a ‘travelling road show’ where we have created a workshop and taken it to various forums where participants have included students, practitioners and educators.

The advice we have received suggests that marketing is best looked at as having a number of phases. The initial stages are outlined above, but once the initial wave of interest peaks, it is possible to explore avenues of franchising and rental as further ways of generating demand.

### **Potential uses of this video teaching resource**

As a result of the experience of workshopping the video with a number of groups, we have discovered uses beyond those we had initially foreseen. These include:

- learning and teaching about family work—skills and techniques;

- preparing social work students for fieldwork placements in agencies which work with families;
- providing a basis for discussion in supervision;
- developing staff—as a refresher or where a practitioner is new to family work or changing role in an organisation;
- showing to families who may be anxious about what to expect in family counselling; and
- offering a means of understanding the powerful influence of family dynamics when working with family sub-systems and/or individuals.

We have discovered that viewers approach the learning experience of the video on different levels. Some do so from an elementary level, focussing mostly on content and the narrative story of the family, while others add to this an ability to critique the process and skills demonstrated, from their own models of practice. For example, a colleague showed the video to students on two occasions. On the first showing, students were asked to critique the video. Some responded to this task by saying what was wrong with the demonstrated practice, others were able to identify and name skills, but to varying degrees without an informed basis for the critique. On the second showing, they were asked to consider how implementing a different model of practice would change the questions asked and skills utilised. This promoted engagement with the video material on a different and deeper level. It also enabled these final year students, who were consolidating their own model of practice, to extend their understanding of systemic and narrative approaches to family work if these are their preferred approaches, or to compare and contrast these approaches with another model, for example a cognitive-behavioural approach.

#### **Hints for new players**

As newcomers to this field, we encountered a steep learning curve, hence this section on tips for new players.

1. In the editing process, it is important to realise that picture and sound quality may not be as good as it will be in the finished version. This is because the technical editing involves a two stage process—offline and online editing. In the offline process, raw footage is captured at a low image quality and it is at this point that the bulk of the editing takes place. In the online process, only the footage which will be used is recaptured at a higher image quality, and finishing takes place which includes the addition of graphics and the final audio mixdown.
2. In the post-production phase, we realised that there were a number of items not included in the budget. These were: the launch function, costs associated with the booklets and video covers and labels; duplication costs; advertising flyers and the short promotional video.
3. If making a video teaching resource, the following are items that we recommend be included in the budget: costs for camera crew and sound operator; payment of actors/practitioners; post-production offline and online editing; graphics; tapes used in editing process; original duplication tapes (Beta SP); script advice; music (original or royalties); venue hire; catering costs; launch function; booklet production (printing and copying); video cover design; video duplication; labels; video covers; advertising flyers; and costs and promotional video.
4. In marketing, we opted for consistency of design and content of the cover pages of the video and the booklet, and included the same design for the order form. We think this enhanced the brand potential of this resource.

5. The timescale for the project was affected by our need to manage the process alongside other competing workload demands. For us, the whole project from inception and funding approval through to launch and sales took around 20 months. We believe that with largely dedicated time, such a project could be accomplished in around 6 months.

### **Conclusion**

Increasingly, there is a need to capture the attention of 'the video generation' by creating innovative resources that utilise this medium. Our purpose in writing this article about the making of *Home Improvements* is to contribute to ideas around best practice by sharing our experiences of developing a video teaching resource. One of our key learnings in this project has been the value of collaboration between educators and practitioners in meeting identified needs. It is our intention that this collaboration will continue in the next stage of the project as we use the profits generated from the first video to fund the next in the series, which will concentrate on family work from an Iwi Maori perspective.

Feedback to date from educators, students and practitioners suggests that we have met a gap in the market for an interactive teaching resource on subject matter that would otherwise mainly be taught by role play and simulation. While we know that social workers have always had knowledge and expertise in family work, we see that in recent years opportunities to practice in this area have become restricted to certain agencies as a result of restructuring. We have been told from a number of sources that the video has created a realisation that social work as a profession in Aotearoa/New Zealand is reclaiming work with families as a key area.