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# Filmmaking as a research method: Foregrounding the meaning of an occupation based on relationality

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## ABSTRACT

Arts-based methods have allowed occupational scientists to advance understandings about occupations by accessing their tacit meaning, thereby enabling a deeper and diverse exploration of human engagement and experiences. While various arts-based methods are used by occupational scientists, filmmaking remains underutilized. This paper presents an example of how the filmmaking process used in an ethnographic study, including building relationships with community members, contributed to understanding the meaning of a traditional occupation. The development and outcome of this documentary film focused on the meaning of small-grain cultivation to the community members. Those who participated in the study were invited to preview the film, participate in an interview about their learnings, and provide feedback about the documentary. The filmmaking process and outcome offered meaningful teachings to community members and researchers, and helped promote the value of sustaining small grains cultivation. At the core, building human-to-human relationships was fundamental to creating a meaningful film and to the research process. Despite challenges, filmmaking served to deepen understandings of the meaning of a traditional occupation, bridging gaps between older and younger generations, and widely promoting the occupation of small grains cultivation to support its continuation.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les méthodologies fondées sur les arts ont permis aux personnes chercheuses en science de l'occupation d'approfondir la compréhension des occupations en accédant à leur signification tacite, ouvrant ainsi la voie à une exploration plus riche et diversifiée de l'engagement et des expériences humaines. Bien que diverses approches artistiques soient utilisées dans ce domaine, le recours au cinéma demeure sous-exploité. Cet article présente un exemple illustrant comment le processus de réalisation cinématographique, intégré à une étude ethnographique et incluant la création de liens avec les membres de la communauté, a contribué à la compréhension du sens d'une occupation traditionnelle. Le développement et le résultat de ce film documentaire portaient sur la signification de la culture des céréales à petits grains pour les membres de la communauté. Les personnes ayant participé à l'étude ont été invitées à visionner le film, à prendre part à une entrevue sur leurs apprentissages et à formuler des commentaires sur le documentaire. Le processus de réalisation et le produit final ont offert

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## KEYWORDS

Occupational Science; kunstbasierte Methoden; Dokumentarfilm; qualitative Methoden; Anbau von Kleinkörnern; Hirse; Videografie

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Ciencia ocupacional; métodos basados en las artes; documental; métodos cualitativos; cultivo de cereales menores; mijo; videografía

## 关键词

职能科学; 艺术本位方法; 纪录片; 质性方法; 小粒谷物栽培小米; 影像记录

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des enseignements significatifs aux membres de la communauté et aux personnes chercheuses, tout en favorisant la reconnaissance de la valeur du maintien de la culture des petits grains. Au cœur de cette démarche, la création de relations humaines s'est révélée essentielle pour produire un film porteur de sens et pour enrichir le processus de recherche. Malgré les défis rencontrés, la production du film a permis d'approfondir la compréhension du sens d'une occupation traditionnelle, de créer des ponts entre les générations et de promouvoir largement la culture des petits grains afin d'en soutenir la pérennité.

#### **ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

Kunstbasierte Methoden haben es Betätigungswissenschaftler\*innen ermöglicht, ihr Verständnis von Betätigung zu vertiefen, indem sie Zugang zu deren impliziter Bedeutung erhielten und so eine tiefere und vielfältigere Erforschung des menschlichen Eingebundenseins in Betätigung und menschlicher Erfahrung ermöglichten. Während Betätigungswissenschaftler\*innen verschiedene kunstbasierte Methoden anwenden, wird Filmemachen nach wie vor zu wenig genutzt. Dieser Artikel zeigt beispielhaft, wie der Prozess der Filmproduktion, einschließlich des Beziehungsaufbaus zu Community-Mitgliedern, im Rahmen einer ethnografischen Studie zum Verständnis der Bedeutung einer traditionellen Betätigung beigetragen hat. Die Entwicklung und das Ergebnis dieses Dokumentarfilms konzentrierten sich auf die Bedeutung des Anbaus von Kleinkorngetreide für die Mitglieder der Gemeinschaft. Diejenigen, die an der Studie teilgenommen hatten, wurden eingeladen, den Film vorab anzusehen, an einem Interview über ihre Erkenntnisse teilzunehmen und Feedback zum Dokumentarfilm zu geben. Der Prozess der Filmproduktion und das Ergebnis boten den Community-Mitgliedern als auch den Forschenden wertvolle Erkenntnisse und trugen dazu bei, den Wert der Erhaltung des Anbaus von kleinen Getreidesorten hervorzuheben. Im Kern war der Aufbau zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen von grundlegender Bedeutung für die Erstellung eines aussagekräftigen Films und für den Forschungsprozess. Trotz aller Herausforderungen trug das Filmen dazu bei, das Verständnis für die Bedeutung einer traditionellen Betätigung zu vertiefen, die Kluft zwischen älteren und jüngeren Generationen zu überbrücken und die Betätigung des Anbauens von kleinen Getreidesorten bekannt zu machen, um deren Fortbestand zu sichern.

#### **RESUMEN**

Los métodos basados en las artes han permitido a los científicos ocupacionales avanzar en la comprensión de las ocupaciones al acceder a sus significados tácitos, lo que posibilita una exploración más profunda y diversa del compromiso y las experiencias humanas. Si bien son utilizados diferentes métodos basados en las artes por los científicos ocupacionales, el cine sigue estando poco aprovechado. Este artículo presenta un ejemplo de cómo el proceso cinematográfico utilizado en un estudio etnográfico, incluyendo la construcción de relaciones con los miembros de la comunidad, contribuyó a comprender el significado de una ocupación tradicional. El desarrollo y resultado de este documental se centró en el significado del cultivo de cereales menores para los miembros de la comunidad. Aquellos que participaron en el estudio fueron invitados a ver el film, participar en una entrevista sobre lo que aprendieron y proporcionar comentarios sobre el documental. El proceso cinematográfico y el resultado ofrecieron enseñanzas significativas tanto para los miembros de la comunidad como para los investigadores, y ayudaron a promover el valor de mantener el cultivo de cereales menores. En el núcleo, la construcción de relaciones humanas fue fundamental para crear un film significativo y para el proceso de investigación. A pesar de los desafíos, el cine profundizó la comprensión del significado de una ocupación tradicional, cerrando

brechas entre generaciones mayores y jóvenes, y promoviendo ampliamente la ocupación del cultivo de cereales menores para apoyar su continuidad.

#### 摘要

艺术本位方法 (arts-based methods) 使职能科学家能够进入职能活动的隐性意义世界, 从而更深入、更多元地探索人类的活动投入与体验。尽管职能科学家会运用多种艺术本位方法, 但是影片制作的应用仍较为有限。本研究以一项民族志研究为例, 阐述了影片制作过程 (包括与社区成员建立关系) 如何助理解一项传统职能活动的意义。该纪录片的制作与成果聚焦于小粒谷物栽培对社区成员的意义。研究参与者受邀观看影片初剪版、参与访谈以分享他们的理解与收获, 并为纪录片提供反馈。影片制作的过程与成果为社区成员和研究人员带来了富有意义的启示, 同时也有助于彰显传承小粒谷物栽培的价值。从核心层面而言, 建立真实的人际关系是创作一部富有意义的影片及开展研究过程的基础。尽管面临诸多挑战, 影片制作加深了人们对于这一传统职能活动意义的理解, 搭建起代际沟通的桥梁, 并广泛推广小粒谷物栽培这一职能活动, 以支持其传承延续。

Filmmaking is an arts-based research method used in various disciplines, including occupational science. While it remains underutilized, it has contributed to building a diverse literature base in occupational science (Bailliard, 2015; Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019a). We used filmmaking, along with interviews, participant observation, note-taking, photography, and illustration, to explore the meaning of small grains cultivation, a traditional occupation in Japan, for Japanese farmers and their community members. The motivation for using filmmaking was to share the analysis with the community in an artistic and more accessible way, and to support member checking.

In this paper, we discuss filmmaking as a research method and provide an example of how it contributed to a deeper understanding of the meaning of traditional knowledge and practices. This paper unfolds the filmmaking process by describing each step, along with the challenges and learnings that emerged from the process. Additionally, this paper describes how filmmaking provided an opportunity for the dedicated work of small grains cultivators to be seen and appreciated by community members and those outside of the community. It also facilitated open conversations between younger and older generations regarding the meaning and importance of this traditional occupation.

### Filmmaking: An Arts-Based Research Method

Arts-based methods are used in various disciplines during data generation, analysis, and interpretation, and to represent the findings, in order to address research questions in a holistic and engaged way (Leavy, 2020; McCloy et al., 2014). Arts-based methods can be used to access meaning, document observations, construct counterstories, capture processes, and facilitate dialogue (Asaba et al., 2024; Coemans et al., 2019; Goesling, 2018; Prosser, 2011; Prosser et al., 2008; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998; Wang & Burris, 1997).

In occupational science, arts-based methods have allowed researchers to advance understandings of occupations by accessing tacit meanings of occupation that are not elicited by interviews alone (Hartman et al., 2011). Because visual images can convey meanings that go beyond the written word (Asaba et al., 2024; Harper, 2002), they also enable a deeper and different exploration of human engagement and experiences (Asaba et al., 2024; Bowman & Mah, 2024; Pugh & Heatwole Shank, 2023). Arts-based methods may also facilitate deeper engagement in data-gathering interviews and provide a reflective tool. As they often evoke spontaneous and unpredictable answers from community members, they open up opportunities to talk about issues that are seldom discussed, thus encouraging further debate

(Mitchel & de Lange, 2020; Pauwels, 2015). Combining interviews with arts-based methods allows the expertise of the participants to be highlighted and affirmed.

Arts-based methods provide an opportunity to give voice to people who use diverse expressions that might be otherwise unheard. These methods have allowed occupational scientists to work with community members to raise awareness of the issues they are struggling against (Asaba et al., 2024; Lal et al., 2012). Furthermore, arts-based methods can help to equalize power relationships between researchers and community members by valuing community members' direct testimony and involvement in the analysis process (Bowman & Mah, 2024).

Arts-based methods can also support the ethical conduct of research in ways that benefit both communities and researchers (Pauwels, 2015), as well as motivating social change (Mitchel & de Lange, 2020; Schratz & Walker, 2005). These methods depend on a conduct of relationality in which engagement of research participants is valued, and their thoughts and words are thereby better understood.

Among various arts-based methods, filmmaking can be used to explore and render culture as living practices (Grimshaw & Ravets, 2015). A film "carries the imprint of subjectivities brought together and created through the encounter" (Grimshaw & Ravets, 2015, p. 266), creating an expansive space between film participants, filmmaker, and viewers. As filmmaking provides access to data through visual-based reporting, this method can convey meanings, values, and feelings, and can promote critical dialogue about personal and community issues. Both the outputs and outcomes can then be used to engage with policymakers, supporting broader knowledge mobilization (Bowness et al., 2024).

Benjamin-Thomas et al. (2019a, 2019b, 2022) contributed to the development of filmmaking and participatory action research within the discipline of occupational science. This paper continues in the tradition of Benjamin-Thomas et al.'s work and contributes to the further development of filmmaking by sharing examples of how filmmaking contributes to understanding the meaning of an occupation and bridging perspectives across generations and communities.

## Positionality

First author: I am a Japanese cis woman, scholar, and artist. I grew up in an urban area in Japan and speak Japanese as my first language. I have worked with Indigenous communities in the Eastern Himalayas and Zimbabwe, as well as local communities in Japan. Whenever I traveled and stayed with a community, I brought a sketchbook and a pen as I found that drawing the landscape was a way to genuinely connect with the community and the land. Often, community members, especially children, came up to me and observed what I was drawing, which initiated a conversation. Art, especially drawing, created an opportunity for me to express who I am as a human, before a researcher. Through my previous fieldwork in Eastern Himalaya from 2011-2012 and 2014, as well as in Zimbabwe in 2016, documenting ancestral foodways using arts-based methods became my life's passion. Engaging with communities through art has become an indispensable process for my research, valuing relationality to the people, plants, and land. During the pandemic, I challenged myself to become a self-taught documentary filmmaker and created an hour-long documentary film, which this paper describes. Sharing my research and learnings from communities with photographs, illustrations, documentary films, and exhibitions has also become my passion. I have held multiple solo exhibitions in Japan, Canada, and India, as well as collaborative exhibitions in Canada and Japan. In reporting the conduct and findings of the research, the first person "I, me, and my" are used in reporting my actions and decisions.

Second author: I am a Canadian cis woman. As an occupational scientist for over 40 years, I have experience in using arts-based methods, including photo elicitation, to capture children's perspectives. While I do not have experience in filmmaking, I have a deep interest and understanding of occupation and was supportive of the first author's challenge and learning journey to create her first documentary film.

## Research Context

Filmmaking was used as part of an ethnographic study of the traditional occupation of small grains cultivation in Japan, an occupation that has been practiced for over 2,800 years (Nasu & Momohara,

2016; Shoda et al., 2018). While small grains were an important staple food for Japanese people for hundreds of years, since the 1950s, the majority of farmers in Japan have abandoned this traditional occupation (Masuda, 2001; Ogura et al., 2024). The main driver of this abandonment has been the influence of modern agricultural methods, which focus on efficiency and yield. While small grains have desirable characteristics of long-term storability, high nutritional value, and drought and cold-temperature tolerance (Aidoo et al., 2016; Masuda, 2001; Singh et al., 2021) and cultivating them has contributed to saving people from famine, the yield of small grains cannot compete with cash crops such as rice. Additionally, because rice was associated with upper-class eating habits, small grains were looked down upon as a food for the lower class and those in poverty. Threshing and dehulling it is also more laborious, due to the size of the grain (~3.5 mm). For these reasons, the majority of farmers changed to cultivating and eating rice as their primary crop and staple food when they were introduced to modern mechanized farming (Masuda 2001; Ogura & Forwell 2023; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993), leading to a drastic decrease in the number of cultivators and lack of incentives for younger generations to engage in small grains cultivation (Ogura, 2024; Ogura et al., 2024).

Despite most Japanese farmers abandoning small grains cultivation, a small number have continued this traditional occupation. They persist because of importantly held social, ecological, and personal meanings, which include protecting the ancestral seeds and knowledge, maintaining their health, restoring the forest, and finding joy and richness in the laborious physical work (Ogura 2024; Ogura & Forwell, 2023; Ogura et al., 2024). Small grains cultivation and associated ways of life have also attracted younger generations who were raised in cities but have moved to villages to engage in the traditional occupation, finding the passion to protect the heirloom seeds and live a way of life that is in harmony with nature (Ogura et al., 2024).

### **Motivation for Using Filmmaking as a Research Method**

Using arts-based methods was essential for this ethnographic research for two reasons. First,

exploring traditional occupations and knowledge involves understanding traditional ontologies and epistemologies, bodily intelligence and tacit knowledge, as well as emotions and feelings. Filmmaking offered a way to capture and document the knowledge, emotional expressions, tone of voice, body movements, and human-nature relationships involved.

Second, traditional occupations have an artistic dimension, depicted through a way of life that is in relationship with nature and reflects the worldview of the people who practice them. Through past fieldwork, I have found that ancestral knowledge and wisdom are embedded in everyday practices, and that these livelihood practices, themselves, are an art. Art is inseparable from small grains cultivation, as historically, cultivators in Japan, the Eastern Himalayas, Zimbabwe, and other places sang while processing grains (Inoue 2017; Ogura et al., 2024; Ogura et al., 2025). Although filmmaking has its own limits, this arts-based method provides researchers with a tool to capture the art of traditional occupations.

It is important to stress that community members' interest in participating in filmmaking was critical in the research process. Before conducting fieldwork and gathering data, I visited community partners and spent time building relationships. During this time, I received a request from a community partner, Mr Katsuo Odakawa, to document and disseminate knowledge of the traditional cultivation practice using a video, so that the wider population, especially younger generations, could watch and learn the cultivation methods. It was a fortunate coincidence that both the community partner and my interests aligned in using filmmaking. I discussed this idea with other community partners and obtained informed consent from all community members.

### **The Filmmaking Process, Challenges, and Emergent Learnings**

Filmmaking is a complex, multifactorial process that provides a comprehensive platform to inform the research. Below, we describe a) the process of filmmaking, including videography, editing, and screening of the film; b) challenges and drawbacks of creating a film; c) learnings

that emerged, particularly, what the film offered to community members and researchers; and d) how it promoted this occupation for its future sustainability.

### ***The filmmaking process***

I interviewed 20 community members from three communities in Japan: two in Iwate prefecture in the northeast, which is the largest producer of small grains in Japan, and the third in Miyazaki prefecture in the southwest, which preserves a traditional shifting cultivation method with cultural burning. The communities are non-Indigenous, but small-grain cultivation has been the ancestral and cultural practice in their region for generations. Research methods used were interviews (planned and/or walk-along), participant observation, fieldnote taking, filmmaking, photography, and illustration. The use of multiple methods alongside filmmaking, especially interviews and participant observations, was critical in understanding the meaning of small grains cultivation to community members. Filmmaking was used for three purposes: a) to support the younger generations to learn about the importance of this traditional occupation from older generations so they could take the occupation up in the future; b) to bring the study findings back to the communities in an artistic format that would make it easier for them to engage in the research process; and c) to enable member checking about the accuracy of the interpretations.

The filmmaking process also strengthened an ethical component of the research by enhancing community members' agency, engagement, and influence over the final video production. This was possible with the community members' agreement on the research and the filmmaking process. Prior to data gathering and filming, I obtained written consent from each community member to film and photograph them; to make the film and photographs public, such as putting it on YouTube for educational purposes; and to publish the study results in journal articles and books. The consent included using their real names, rather than pseudonyms, as they would be recognisable in the completed film. Ethics approval was granted by the University of British Columbia (H20-03896). However, we argue that

while obtaining institutional ethical approval is essential, it may not be enough, as relationship building must be at the center of ethical research and creating a meaningful film for both researchers and community members.

The four steps involved in the filmmaking process included: 1) building relationships with community members; 2) engaging in the capture and collection of video footage, photographs, and commentary; 3) showing the film to the community members who participated in the study; and 4) conducting interviews or focus groups to capture their learnings from, or observations in, the documentary. These four steps are described below, in addition to challenges and drawbacks of creating the film.

#### ***Step 1. Building human-to-human relationships***

Building trusting relationships with community members is essential to qualitative research and was important for the filmmaking process, especially filming the interviews. If researchers interview with a camera and audio recording equipment without building relationships, that would be disrespectful to the communities involved and may be intimidating for community members. Being able to have deep conversations is crucial for understanding the meaning of an occupation, and this is based on the relationship researchers create with the communities. It is important for researchers to be open-minded and respect both the humans and more-than-human beings that the researchers are inquiring about. Researchers must also be aware of the challenging impacts they may have on communities in which they do their research, regardless of positive intentions.

For this study, relationship building involved engaging in the occupation together, such as processing small grains using wooden hammers or sifters. Interestingly, it was almost always when engaging in laborious occupations together, using hands and bodies, that community members and I started sharing deeper inner thoughts and life stories. I was not only listening to community members but also providing opportunities for them to relate to me as a person, not just a researcher. This opened an opportunity for them to understand my motivation for conducting the research. Learning local culture

and dialect, as well as eating local meals together and helping with daily chores, were also a part of relationship building and a way to show respect for their way of life.

I spent as much time as possible (2-150 hours) with the community members, getting to know each other before conducting interviews. This helped community members feel more comfortable when sharing their thoughts, and for me to be able to better understand their personal journeys. Engaging in an occupation together also helped me gain my own experiences of the occupation and supported understanding during the interviews.

Relationship building involved respecting community members' ways of life, patience, honesty, deep listening, and commitment to communication. There were times when this process became challenging. On one occasion, I had a 2-hour intensive conversation with a community partner who had experienced research fatigue. Previous research-related experiences were not respectful to the community partner who gave so much of his time and effort. Only after the long conversation, he shook my hand, and I thought: 'We became friends'. It was a situation where becoming friends was essential, or the door would have been closed to continuing research with the community. Several people who were visiting from outside of the community mentioned that they saw a trusting relationship between the community partner and I. This relationship-building

step is important both for the filmmaking process and any kind of qualitative research.

**Step 2. Creating a documentary film**

An hour-long documentary film was created based on the first interviews that documented the meanings of small grains and its cultivation from the perspective of both older and younger generations, as well as photographs and video footage captured through participant observation. The film includes a selection of clips from audio and visual interview recordings taken with cultivators and young family members, the audio and video recordings from participant observation in the fields, and contextual footage taken in each community. Photos of the community members, the small grains taken in and away from the fields, and an illustration of small grains were also included. An intentional choice not to include narration or explanation was made. Rather, only the voices of community members are heard, to enhance the authenticity of their voices. The interviews were conducted in Japanese, which is the first language for the community members.

The main challenges that emerged during the filmmaking process were creating a comfortable atmosphere for interviewees to be in front of a video camera; the cost of equipment; using the equipment; and the difficulty of transporting it during fieldwork, especially in mountainous environments. These difficulties and concerns

**Table 1.** Drawbacks and strategies to remediate.

Drawbacks	Remediation undertaken in the study	Recommendation
Discomfort of interviewees to be filmed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensured that I was talking to the person face-to-face, and not through the camera lens</li> <li>• Ensured that the camera was not placed directly between the interviewee and myself</li> <li>• Allowed the interviewees to select the location and the seating arrangement</li> </ul>	Build good relationships first and provide a comfortable atmosphere for interviewees
Cost of equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtained a second-hand iPhone (11 plus)</li> <li>• Applied and secured scholarship (CAD\$2500)</li> </ul>	Invest in high-quality audio, as audio quality is more important than visual Have backups and record with at least two pieces of equipment
Using equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watched various YouTube videos online to learn the equipment</li> <li>• Asked filmmakers for advice</li> <li>• Made demonstration videos</li> </ul>	Take a filmmaking class
Carrying equipment during fieldwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bought a second-hand bag specifically designed for carrying videos</li> </ul>	Hire a field research assistant for filmmaking If appropriate, hire an assistant from the community being studied

could, however, be remedied by some practical strategies (see Table 1).

Interviews were completed while processing small grains together, sitting outside beside agricultural fields, or while visiting community members' houses or offices. A comfortable atmosphere for the interviewees to talk was prioritized, which at times resulted in sacrificing visual quality (e.g., not being able to set up a video camera in the best spot). Addressing this limitation required drawing the interviewees into a deeper conversation so they would forget about the camera (i.e., setting up video and audio equipment while I was having an easy conversation). Other methods included choosing a location and seating arrangement that were comfortable for interviewees (often being outside in nature), and placing cameras diagonally to the interviewee so they do not directly see the equipment when talking. On one occasion, I shifted the camera away from a community member's face towards the background landscape to support sharing a deep thought. While not having a field assistant was challenging for carrying equipment, it enhanced the conversation to not have someone present with whom members did not have a trusting relationship (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019a).

Having to carry and set up all the equipment to document planting and harvesting small grains on the steep slopes was physically challenging for me. However, readily available mobile phones with quality audio and video technology can be used for video. They are lighter and often less intimidating for interviewees because of their small size, while also reducing the drawbacks of costly and weighty equipment.

To capture visuals, videos were shot using both an iPhone 11 Plus and a Nikon D7500. For photos, both digital and film cameras were used, including the Nikon D7500 and a Nikon FM10. For recording, ZOOM H6 and ZOOM iQ7, as well as a Lavalier microphone connected to an iPhone 6 as backup, were used. Filming occurred during the first interview and participant observation.

Photos were taken throughout the fieldwork, in and outside of the small grain fields to capture the community members' engagement in the occupation, including planting, harvesting, and

processing of grains after harvest; food made from small grains; and the landscapes. All photos captured the occupation of small grains cultivation and the communities' ways of life. As an illustrator, I also drew small grains and included an illustration in the video to provide a nuanced perspective of small grains.

The interviews ranged from 10-150 minutes per interview, and were edited down to 2 to 5 minutes for each person, to make an hour-long documentary film. Some interviews were conducted over multiple sessions. To edit the video, Adobe Premiere Pro software on MacBook Pro and a 27-inch 4 K monitor were used. To support the filmmaking process, I watched a plethora of YouTube videos that explained the use of various pieces of equipment and the editing process, and sought advice from friends who are documentary filmmakers. The process of editing to a reasonable length greatly helped me to understand and capture the essence of the meaning of small grains cultivation.

### ***Step 3. Returning to the communities***

The documentary film was taken back to 20 community members who participated in the first interview for their responses and verification of the accuracy of the documentary film's message. It was screened either in groups or individually, based on community preferences. A laptop (MacBook Pro) and speakers (Sanwa Supply MM-SPU7BK) were used to screen the film.

### ***Step 4. Interview 2***

After the community members watched the film, semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. There were 18 individual interviews and one interview done in a pair. In addition, three focus group discussions were held after individual interviews. Two of these groups happened organically with two pairs (in Karumai and Towa) as they started reflecting on the film. One was after their individual interviews, and the other was while working together to process small grains. The intention was to gain feedback from the community members to further edit the documentary, but community members' responses were positive, and none identified examples of misrepresentation of

their meanings. Instead, several young people expressed their wish to share it with their family and friends.

I then translated and added English subtitles to the documentary. Though challenging, this process provided an opportunity for further in-depth thinking about the meanings, as some words and concepts were hard to translate. The English-subtitled version of the documentary film can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/hL03ffysuWU>.

### **Learnings from the Filmmaking Process**

In this section, we present the four learnings that emerged through using filmmaking during the research, particularly for community members. These included that it was a powerful intergenerational communication tool for education and role-modelling, that it was an authentic representation of each community member, visually captured the fullness of the practice/ways of doing small grains cultivation, and expanded the network of small grains farmers.

#### **The community**

The majority of small-grain cultivators in Japan are over 60 years old, with few members of the younger generations involved in or holding knowledge of this occupation. The documentary served as a communication tool to share meanings across generations in different sites, as well as within the family and community. After viewing the film, several community members mentioned that they had heard for the first time comments and feelings of their family or community members. Community members, especially older generations, were surprised and delighted to hear that younger generations had positive perceptions and were interested in small grains cultivation. By understanding what others are thinking and what the occupation means to them, the film bridged a communication gap between older and younger generations.

Community members talked about how the traditional occupation is important for them to protect ancestral seeds and restore the forest, and how it provides emotional and physical well-being. In particular, members of younger

generations who had decided to become full-time farmers despite the pressure from Japanese mainstream society to get a highly paid job, and who lacked people who understood and appreciated their decisions, felt encouraged by having their voices heard. Ms Haruka Yuasa, a young farm-trainee who migrated from a city to Towa said,

共感して泣きそうになった。素の自分がそのまま映像になった。[I almost cried when something was said that touched me to my core, because I also share the same thoughts and feelings [that are not normally understood by the majority of people who are in cities or engaging in industrial agriculture]. The video captured my true self.]

Another young community member in Towa, Mr Nobuaki Furumatsu, expressed hope that the film would be released publicly. In Shiiba village, Ms Ayaka Okura mentioned that she wanted to show it to local people, including her husband. She said,

世界遺産になっても、こっちに住んでいる人は雑穀栽培にそんなに興味がないから、そういうことを話す機会もないのだけど。これを観てもらったら（大切さを）ちょっと分かってもらえるかもしれない。[Most people in the locality are not interested in small grains cultivation, so we don't talk about it much, even though this village was designated as one of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Sites by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization thanks to small grains cultivation. If they watched the film, they might understand the value a bit.]

The younger participants who had moved from cities to villages to become farmers hoped that their family and friends would watch the film to understand why they were cultivating small grains or why they decided to become farmers. Mr Toru Sakawa, the owner of a farm in Towa, mentioned that it was important for one of his farm trainees to talk about and document his motivation for becoming a farmer and engaging in small grains cultivation, so he could reflect

on his initial motivation when he encounters hardship in the future.

The documentary authentically represented the meaning of small grains cultivation for each community member, across physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, and supported community members who wanted their voices to be heard. It was made possible based on the relationships built between the community members and me (or the documentary filmmaker), which was reflected in the interview.

The film visually documented the art of traditional practices and ways of doing that are endangered, including how people use their bodies to process the grains manually, and the traditional shifting cultivation method that uses cultural burning. The documentary enabled current and future generations, as well as cultivators from different communities, to learn about the traditional methods, as it provides a permanent graphic record of small grain cultivation. It may also be useful in promoting small grains cultivation and inspiring other young people to be involved in the traditional occupation. Ms Mariko Odakawa, a young non-cultivator in Karumai, said,

特に都会の人たちの仕事ってデスクワークだから、疲れが溜まっている人はきっとこれを観たら新鮮で良いんじゃないかなって思います。だってみんなすごく幸せそうな、生き生きした表情で。特に若い人には、若い方がしゃべった言葉、浄化されるのか仕事を辞めて農業をやっているのがすごく幸せとか、それがすごくわかりやすく伝わるんじゃないかなと思いましたね。[*It may be refreshing for people in cities who are tired of working [with computers] to watch this film, as everyone in the film seems so happy and has a lively expression on their faces. Especially young people might be inspired by hearing other young people in the film talking about how their minds get cleansed by engaging in farming or how happy they are, quitting their job in the city!*"]

In addition, the film created an opportunity to expand the network of small grains farmers across Japan, beyond their small rural

communities. After watching the documentary, several community members said they wanted to meet with others in the film in person, indicating that they found others shared similar intentions, issues, and visions. Connecting in person could provide motivation to continue the traditional occupation, as they found allies in other locations.

### **Researchers and the scholarly community**

As a research method, filmmaking augmented data collection, data analysis and interpretation, analysis verification, and knowledge translation. For data collection, filmmaking provided an opportunity to review, see, and hear in situ aspects of small grains cultivation, both those that were obvious and aspects that were missed during the interview. It allowed the capture of the complex unit of analysis, that is, the occupation of small grains cultivation. It also enabled triangulation with other data sources, an important feature when conducting qualitative research to foster credibility and provide evidence of validity while mitigating research bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For analysis, filmmaking enhanced the depth and quality of the interpretation and the summarized analysis and supported contextual accuracy that may go unnoticed. During analysis, the interview video footage was watched multiple times to fully appreciate the important key meanings of the traditional occupation. This process provided an essential opportunity for me to understand the meanings of this traditional occupation. The film also helped the second author to deepen their understanding of the context and the people, beyond reading transcripts.

Taking the documentary to the community members to discuss, verify, and/or contest my interpretation, filmmaking worked as an opportunity for member checking to enhance veracity. This process verified my understanding of the meanings they conveyed, thanks to the rigorous process of analysing data through editing the film.

Finally, for knowledge translation, the film fulfilled the purpose of bringing the research outcome back to the communities, eliciting a sense of pride, especially among younger

generations who hoped that their voices would be heard. Posting it on YouTube then informed a broader audience about the importance of the small grains cultivation.

### **Sustaining the Occupation: Impact of Knowledge Translation**

Since the development of the documentary, there have been several opportunities to screen it within solo and collaborative exhibitions. The first was at the University of British Columbia, as part of a month-long photo exhibition. Thirty-seven people from inside and outside of the university attended the screening, with two of them expressing interest in trying to cultivate small grains in their fields. They also became part of the Growing Millet Together! project (<https://explore.beatymuseum.ubc.ca/millet/>), which used WhatsApp to bring together small millet farmers in Zimbabwe, Kenya, India, Japan, and Canada to share their knowledge and experiences with small grains cultivation. This outcome demonstrated the impact of the documentary film in attracting new (non-full-time) farmers to start engaging in this occupation.

The second screening was part of a collaborative exhibition based on the Growing Millet Together! project. The exhibition, *The Magic of Millets* (2024), was held at the University of British Columbia's Beaty Biodiversity Museum in Canada (Figure 1) for 9 months, to share the importance and the meaning of small-grain cultivation. In 2025, *Zakkoku no Fushigi Ten* (Kobayashi, 2025), a translated version of the English title, went to three Japanese communities in the northeast of the country, including Karumai, with the support of Tohoku University. I edited the documentary to 30 minutes and screened it as part of these exhibitions. This film can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/IIeZd-9eOLc>.

The exhibition events provided opportunities for the older and younger community members involved in the research to share their experiences with small grains cultivation as guest speakers. The events were featured by local newspapers and TV programs (Hiraga, 2025; Ichinohe 2025; Kobayashi, 2025; Paku, 2025a, 2025b), which promoted the importance of the

traditional occupation to community members who were not involved in the research.

Written feedback from exhibition visitors indicated that the exhibitions and documentary film provided an opportunity for local people to appreciate the value of small grains and sparked interest in eating and cooking them. These experiences show the power of a documentary in promoting traditional occupations.

### **Final Reflection and Conclusion**

In this paper, we discussed how filmmaking contributed to deepening understandings of the practice and meaning of a traditional occupation, small grains cultivation, and presented the challenges and learnings that emerged from the research process. As a research method, filmmaking supported data generation and triangulation, analysis, interpretation, and presentation, contributing to knowledge translation and dissemination and planting a seed for future social mobilization to sustain the occupation.

The film offered the contextual details and flows of a traditional occupation that would not otherwise have been captured. For example, audio information, including the sounds of the environment and the tone of community members' voices, was useful in interpreting scenarios and revealed moments that may have been masked. This provided dimensions of an occupation that would be missed in either photography or observation. Filmmaking also made possible the dissemination of the research output to a global community.

Although this project did not use participatory methods and focused on adults, we find similar key processes in Benjamin-Thomas et al.'s (2019a) work, such as the importance of building trusting relationships with community members. While building trusting relationships takes considerable time, respect, dedication, and commitment, an authentic representation of community members cannot be achieved without these human-to-human relationships.

In this research, the community members were the experts. Their active participation and willingness to be involved were key in the filmmaking process and gaining an in-depth



**Figure 1.** Screening the documentary film as part of the exhibition, *The Magic of Millets*, at the University of British Columbia's Beaty Biodiversity Museum, Canada. In the photo, Mr Odakawa is explaining the importance of small-grain cultivation to cope with famine.

understanding of their perceptions. Although interest varied from person to person, and not everyone was engaged to the same depth, several older and younger members felt the importance of their stories being told, which impacted their participation and comfort in sharing their thoughts and feelings through video and audio recordings. The power of bridging the gap between older and younger community members and connecting small grains cultivators across sites is important to supporting the sustainability of this occupation. A film screening can also create an opportunity to share the importance of a neglected traditional occupation and ancestral knowledge to local community members, and to bring the efforts of small grains cultivators to light.

While the quality of the film was likely compromised in comparison to hiring a professional filmmaker, because I was the one making decisions about what stayed in or out of the

film, I could be true to the research process. The idea of creating a film was not to sensationalize the subject but to document the ways and means of the traditional occupation for the community members, something we believe was accomplished.

This study demonstrated that filmmaking can be a meaningful and robust method to understand occupation, while nurturing relationships and providing tangible outcomes to community members. While there are challenges and drawbacks, filmmaking can be a useful tool for occupational science researchers in deepening the understanding of the meaning of occupations, bridging generational gaps, bringing research results back to the community, and nurturing cross-cultural communication and learning from each other. Filmmaking is an underutilized method in the field of occupational science that could be used in various occupational situations and is an important methodological tool.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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