

# Images of Community/Community of Images: Environmental Knowing Through Camera Phones

Fumitoshi Kato  
Keio University  
5322 Endo, Fujisawa  
Kanagawa 252-8520, Japan  
+81 466-49-3619  
fk@sfc.keio.ac.jp

## ABSTRACT

There is always a mobile phone within an individual's reach, and information necessary in everyday life is now being stored inside the phone. We are now communicating through exchanging photos over camera phones. From the standpoint of developing a qualitative research method, a camera phone can be understood as a new "gear" for conducting field studies, because it enables us to record and compile diverse standpoints as a set of photos. By capturing images of the community, and by sharing them, we may be able to (re)examine the charms of the local community. Referring to an on-going field research in *Shibamata*, Tokyo, this paper suggests that the use of camera phones may contribute to change our mode of knowing, and thereby create an opportunity to develop a new relationship with the community members. Based on preliminary findings of the study, an experiential learning method for understanding the basics of field research is proposed.

## Keywords

Camera phones, fieldwork, community development, qualitative research method.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones are everywhere. And the uses of mobile phones are changing the ways in which we shape and reshape our day-to-day activities. We are now communicating through exchanging photos over mobile phones. Because of the convenience of taking, sending, and publishing the photos, the use of mobile phones, as cameras, may increase one's opportunity to generate "life documents" [10] within a sequence of daily events. It is suggested that a new mode of more pervasive photo taking is emerging through the use of mobile phones [6] [8], and it contributes, to some extent, to change the ways in which we record and preserve our "life documents" on a daily basis.

From the standpoint of developing a qualitative research method, a camera phone can be understood as a new "gear" for conducting field studies, because it enables us to record and compile diverse standpoints as a set of photos. Especially, it can capture a series of micro-moments embedded within an individual's day-to-day activities. Given the present context, how does the use of camera phones change our mode of knowing, especially in terms of ethnographic research method? What are the possibilities of the camera phones to preserve and share

public images of the community? In order to examine these issues, I will refer to a case of field research conducted in *Shibamata* area in Tokyo, Japan. This paper reports primarily on the second phase of this on-going research.

## 2. CONDUCTING A FIELDWORK WITH CAMERA PHONES

### 2.1 Procedure

The present field study consists of three steps that are closely interrelated. Each step has its own emphasis in terms of our process of knowing. The design of the learning process is primarily based on the theory of experiential learning [7] and grounded theory approaches [11], and it unfolds as three steps. As shown in the Figure 1, these three steps of a field research create a cyclic process.

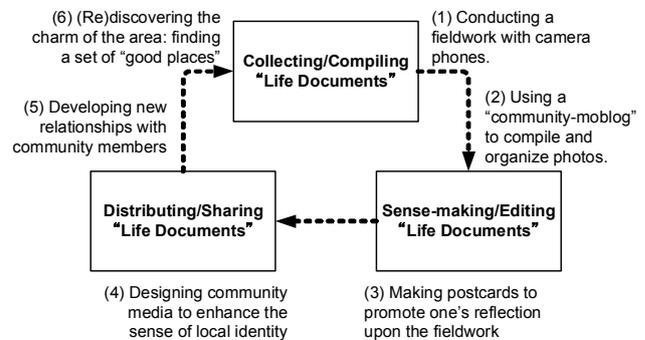


Figure 1. Process of environmental knowing.

#### 2.1.1 Collecting data with phone cameras

In the first step, a primary purpose is to collect and compile photos using a camera phone. I have been using a setting, such as a "community-moblog," [3] [4] in order to support the process of data collection in field studies. These photos can be understood as a pile of "life documents," with which one can begin to weave a story about his/her experiences in the area.

#### 2.1.2 Making sense out of photos

The next step of the study is to select and edit a set of photos. After the fieldwork, researchers are asked to select photos, and to write a short essay (report) to illustrate one's experience of his/her fieldwork. If there are twenty-five researchers, for

example, there are at least twenty-five viewpoints to observe and understand the area under study. Through this process, one has to distance oneself from the situation within which he/she was embedded. It triggers a mode of self-reflection, in that one has to look back and make sense of things and events he/she observed during the fieldwork.

### 2.1.3 Sharing photos with community members

In the context of a community development, it is important to distribute the result of the research back to the community members. As a way to distribute the images of community, the photos and texts are organized into a set of postcards. I suggest that a postcard is a handy, useful medium for presenting one's experiences in the field. It creates an opportunity to open up the storage of a camera phone and convert them into a stream of personal stories. Though it is a print medium, a postcard enables us to browse multiple photos simultaneously, and to share images of the community with others.

By distributing these postcards, one can begin to develop a new relationship with the community members. This process triggers to pursue a collection of additional photos, as well as an exploration of new members for the research project. This cyclic process may expand the scope and perspective of the research itself.

## 3. A FIELD STUDY IN SHIBAMATA, TOKYO

### 3.1 Background<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to explore the possible use of camera phones for a qualitative research method, and to examine the applicability of such method for a community development, we started a field research in November, 2004, in *Shibamata* area in Tokyo, Japan. *Shibamata*, located in the eastern part of Tokyo, is a temple town where traditional Japanese streets, buildings, and lifestyles are well preserved. *Shibamata* is well known for the movie titled "*Otoko wa tsuraiyo* (It's tough being a man)," which is one of the most famous movies in Japan. Since its first episode in 1969, the movie has been released as a long-run series. That is to say, *Shibamata* area itself was in tune with the calendar of the movie production, in that director, producers, and actors/actresses, all worked there on a regular basis. Also, as the movie was on location, residents in the area collaborated in the process of its production. It has been their regular and continuous events, and the movies and the makings of them contributed to build images of the community. The series ended in its 48th episode, as *Kiyoshi Atsumi*, the leading character of the series, passed away in 1996. Since then, the area is experiencing a gradual decrease in the number of tourists and visitors. Thus, for the community members, an important issue was to somehow revitalize the area to attract more visitors, and to seek a new local-identity.

Given such context, we were asked to conduct a small-scale field survey to re-examine the charms of the area. It was expected that we will be able to (re)discover the "great good places" [9] within

the community, primarily from the viewpoint of a younger, post-movie generation. In fact, almost all the members participated did not have opportunities to watch the movie "*Otoko wa tsuraiyo*," and did not have images or pre-understandings of the area. It was, then, the first time for most of them to visit *Shibamata* area.

### 3.2 Phase I: Observing as a "stranger"

On November 3, 2004, we conducted a fieldwork in *Shibamata* area, in that twenty-one students (a mixed group of undergraduate and graduate students) participated as researchers. A map of the area was distributed to the researchers, and they were asked to walk around the area by oneself or with a company, taking photos with their camera phones. In this phase, students conducted a research as "strangers," as outside observers. In other words, they did not have to intervene into the daily lives of the community members. Implications of this phase of the research were reported in my previous paper [3].

## 4. GETTING CLOSER TO THE COMMUNITY MEMBERS

### 4.1 Phase II: Observing as a "temporal resident"

On April 17, 2005, approximately six months later from the first phase of the research, we conducted a fieldwork again in *Shibamata* area. This time, twenty-five students (a mixed group of undergraduate and graduate students) participated as researchers. One of the emphases of this phase was to obtain a standpoint of an "insider," rather than that of a "visitor." Acknowledging the importance of developing close (closer) relationships with the members of the local community, this phase was designed to function as a sort of on-the-job training.

#### 4.1.1 Researching-by-working

Though this was the second time to participate in the field research in *Shibamata* for some of the students, it was expected that researchers are to practice and experience a mode of participant observation in this phase. 11 stores (e.g., a pickle store, sweet shops, and restaurants), mostly located along the approach to the temple, offered students opportunities to work as new workers in their stores. Thus, 2 to 4 students were "dispatched" to one of eleven stores, and worked there during the day. Students were told to follow the instructions from the master of the store they went, and at the same time, to try to take photos with their camera phones (see Figure 2 for an illustration). Starting shortly before noon, the fieldwork lasted for about five hours.

In advance to the fieldwork, we set up a website for collecting and storing photos, as visual fieldnotes. This setting is functionally similar to the "community moblog" that we have been experimenting since April, 2004 [3] [4]. During their fieldwork, their on-the-job research, participants were encouraged, but not limited, to send their photos to the website. When compared to the previous research, it was rather difficult to take photos and send them to the website, because they were actually involved in their work at stores. Particularly, because it was a Sunday afternoon, many of the stores were crowded with

---

<sup>1</sup> This section, 3.1, is an excerpt from my previous paper. See [5] for details.

many visitors. In that afternoon, approximately 250 photos were taken with camera phones and uploaded to the site.



Figure 2. Learning-by-working in *Shibamata* (April 17, 2005).

#### 4.1.2 Making postcards

After the fieldwork, we made twenty-five kinds of postcards, altogether, each of them carrying a store logo, photos, and texts (See Figure 3 for a sample). This time, we also printed a QR-code (2-dimensional barcode) which can be scanned (read) via camera phones. In the code, information about the store (street address and phone number) was embedded. Also, a greeting message from the master of the store was recorded, and embedded as a pointer (URL) to the website. By accessing the website, via QR-code, one can listen to the store masters' voices (sound files) on his/her phone.



Figure 3. A sample postcard.

#### 4.1.3 Understanding about the community

The final step involves an attempt to juxtapose and compare different understandings about the working experiences in the community. As mentioned, each researcher's understandings about *Shibamata* area were organized into a form of postcard. A set of photos selected highlighted the ways in which people work in a particular store, and the texts on the back depicted one's process of a learning-by-working experience. In doing so, we can begin to discuss about different viewpoints regarding one's environmental knowing. While looking and browsing a stack of cards, he/she will recognize a variety of standpoints to understand the images of the community. This is one of the major contributions expected from the present approach. By letting us (or forcing us) constantly change our standpoints, it eventually helps us to escape from possible entrapment into one's own way of seeing. By sharing one's experiences through

a deck of postcards, we may keep us from persisting in "conventional" images of the community.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Environmental knowing through camera phones

By acknowledging that an individual is actively engaged in shifting different viewpoints, he/she may become aware of a set of assumptions and understandings about the life of the local community. It points to the possible contributions of camera phones for a community development, for they may offer experiential learning processes. Camera phones may play an important role as a "community-builder," as a trigger to critically (re)examine the surroundings within which he/she is embedded. As Hyden suggests [1], a socially inclusive urban landscape history can become the basis for new approaches to public history and urban preservation.

### 5.2 POST as a method

Theoretically motivated by the ideas of experiential learning [7] and grounded theory approach [11], inspired by the "method cards" by IDEO [2], and acknowledging the usefulness of a postcard as a medium [5], I have been designing a set of postcards to learn about the basics of conducting a field research. Together with a camera phone, a deck of postcards can be used as a textbook, a town guide, or a series of quotable sayings (lessons). As of this writing, there are about 60 kinds of postcards, and they are categorized by one of the following keywords: Practice, Observe, Search, and Think. One can select and combine different cards to organize them within the context of his/her learning. Also, as they are postcards, one can simply send them to friends and colleagues, and thereby spread the idea of environmental knowing with a camera phone.

#### 5.2.1 Practice

A card in this category has a simple exercise or a tip that one can experiment in the field. For example, issues such as how to keep a "proper" distance between the subject, the importance of a time-lapse recording, and how to position oneself in the field, etc., are arranged as exercises. With a card and a camera phone, one can learn about the basics of qualitative research method. I have been using these postcards in the introductory course on qualitative research method (for undergraduate students) by having the students take photos with their camera phones.

#### 5.2.2 Observe

Each card in this category can be understood as a visual fieldnotes. Postcards created out of the present research are included in this category. A card illustrates the ways in which a researcher conducted a field study, together with his/her ethnographic accounts. By comparing and juxtaposing different cards, that is to compare multiple viewpoints, one can begin to understand the relationships between snap shots (fragments) of the area under study.

#### 5.2.3 Search

On the postcards in this category, useful quotes and sayings are sited, together with photos taken by camera phones. For example, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead on using photographs,

Walter Benjamin on strolling, and other well-known Japanese scholars on conducting fieldwork, etc., are cited. These postcards can be used as a deck of reference cards that promote one's reflective observation about his/her experiences in the field.

#### 5.2.4 Think

Cards included in this category are for conceptualizing one's experiences in the field. It contributes to critically (re)examine one's concrete experience, and to "translate" it into an abstract concept. In other words, cards will provide with a set of vocabularies to describe the situation, and to establish a link between the research and one's day-to-day activities in the past (or future). As shown in the Figure 4, the use of postcards in this category may lead to subsequent practices and experimentations in the field.

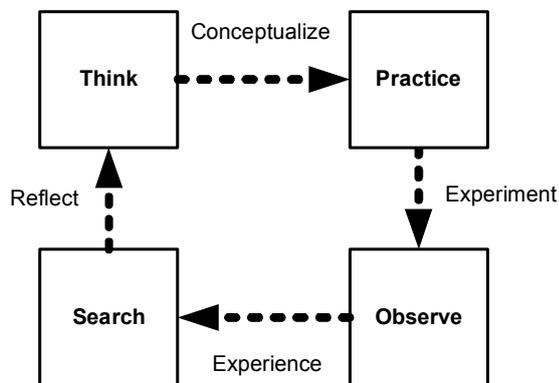


Figure 4. POST as an experiential learning cycle.

### 5.3 Images of community, community of images

As discussed, a camera phone can be utilized as a useful "gear" in conducting a field research, as practices of photo-taking are changing. Particularly, it enables researchers to collect and compile images of the local community. Once selected and edited in a form of postcard, visual images, and sharing of them, may enhance our awareness about the resources of the community. Photos compiled can be examined in terms of understanding the characteristics of the local community, and more interestingly, they lead us to speculate upon multiple viewpoints of ourselves. Shared images may connect people together, functioning as a "community-builder."

### 6. A BIO SKETCH

Fumitoshi KATO (Ph.D., Communication) is currently working as an associate professor at the Faculty of Environmental Information, Keio University, Japan. His research interests include: communication theory, media studies, socio-cultural impacts of new technologies, qualitative research methods, and

experiential learning theory and practice (e.g., simulation and gaming). He is a faculty member of "Keitai (a mobile phone in Japanese) Laboratory" at Keio University, Shonan Fujisawa Campus, where interdisciplinary studies and research programs on socio-cultural impacts of mobile phones are conducted. He is especially interested in the use of camera functions on mobile phones in the context of our practices of visual communication. Recently, he edited a book (with Rei Shiratori and Kiyoshi Arai), "Gaming, simulations, and society: Research scope and perspective" (Springer-Verlag, 2004).

### 7. REFERENCES

- [1] Hayden, D. (1995) *The power of place: Urban landscapes as public history*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [2] IDEO Method Cards. <http://www.ideo.com/methodcards/MethodDeck/index.html>
- [3] Kato, F. (2005) Moblogging as face-work: Sharing a "community-moblog" among project members. Prepared for PICS Workshop, *UbiComp2005*, Tokyo, Japan.
- [4] Kato, F. (2005, in Japanese) Learning through mobile cameras: On the use of "community-moblog" for a project-based learning. Presented at *JSICR 22<sup>nd</sup> Conference*, Yokohama, Japan.
- [5] Kato, F. (2005) Seeing the "seeing" of others: Conducting a field study with mobile phones/mobile cameras. Presented at *Seeing, Understanding, Learning in the Mobile Age*, Communications in the 21st Century: The Mobile Information Society, Budapest, Hungary.
- [6] Kato, F., Okabe, D., Ito, M., and Uemoto, R. (2005) Uses and possibilities of the keitai camera. In Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda (2005) (Eds.) *Personal, portable, pedestrian: Mobile phones in Japanese life* (pp. 301-310). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [7] Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- [8] Okabe, D. and Ito, M. (2003) Camera phones changing the definition of picture-worthy. *Japan Media Review* (29 Aug. 2003) <http://www.ojr.org/japan/wireless/1062208524.php>
- [9] Oldenburg, R. (1989) *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. New York: Marlowe & Com-pany.
- [10] Plummer, K. (2001) *Documents of life 2: An invitation to a critical humanism*. London: Sage.
- [11] Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.