CULTURAL ACTION FOR CHANGE:
A CASE FOR CROSS-CULTURAL, MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS

Kim BERMAN

Department of Visual Art, University of Johannesburg

Abstract

Cultural Action for Change began in 2000 as a joining of artists, educators, and student-researchers to assess sustainability and address the impact of HIV within Phumani Paper; a government-funded poverty alleviation program, establishing hand papermaking and craft enterprises across South Africa. Inspired by ideals of empowerment and self-determination, a series of qualitative, Participatory Action Research (PAR) interventions for HIV awareness and action were introduced at six Phumani papermaking workshop sites. Student researchers and participants, with the collaboration of academics from the University of Michigan, were trained in Photovoice methodology to document with photographs and personal narrative the participants' struggles for economic independence. Through iterative processes of reflection and sharing, participants identified shared social action objectives.

Cultural Action for Change (also termed AIDS Action) consisted of arts-based, multi-disciplinary community interventions conducted over five years, and adopted a PAR framework as an approach that seeks to enhance the lives of the participants. The goal of the AIDS Action Intervention was to provide support to, and increase the agency of, participants of the Phumani Paper craft enterprises affected by the HIV pandemic. The aim was to enable the participants to break the silence, to confront the fear and stigma of HIV, and to seek voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), thereby contributing to reducing the number of deaths in their projects and communities. An additional objective was to achieve an increase in productivity and income for the enterprises as a result of greater group trust, information, networking and agency.

The creative strategies that the research teams used for the AIDS Action intervention were Photovoice and Paper Prayers. The impact assessment conducted revealed that members of the Phumani Paper groups see themselves as individuals who have acquired skills that can transform waste into objects of beauty and have understood their own sense of agency to effect personal and organizational change.

Key Words: *visual methodologies, participatory action research, community engagement, multi-disciplinary*

Introduction

In 2005 the Ford Foundation awarded a grant to the University of Johannesburg to implement a five-year AIDS Action intervention. The goal of the AIDS Action Intervention, subsequently called Cultural Action for Change, was to provide support to, and increase the agency of, participants of the Phumani Paper craft enterprises affected by the HIV pandemic. Some of the craft enterprises experienced staggering losses of up to 50% of their membership through the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS. The aim was to enable the participants to break the silence, to confront the fear and stigma of HIV, and to seek voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), thereby leading to a reduction in the number of deaths in their projects and communities.

This paper argues that community engaged learning requires a participatory, praxis-led and multi-disciplinary approach to research and engagement. The multi-disciplinary approaches aimed to inspire the capacities for inquiring, sharing, dreaming a better future, and for planning actions that transform silence and isolation into articulated goals and collaboration.

Theoretical framework for community engaged learning

In an attempt to clarify and contextualize community-based research in relation to theory and practice, I have adopted two concepts: 'participatory paradigm' and 'praxis' as defined by Marcia Hills and Jennifer Mullett (2000). Expanding on Peter Reason's (1994) discussion of 'participatory paradigms', the authors offer various guiding principles for community-based research. On 'praxis' or the relationship of theory to practice in community-based research, Hills and Mullet acknowledge that theory is often talked about as if it belongs exclusively in the world of the academy. They define theory as an explanation of phenomena; it is implicit in all human action and is therefore necessary in developing evidence for community-based practice. In contrast to orthodox science, community-based research does not see theory as something that is known and that 'informs' practice; as Max Van Manen says: "Practice (or life) comes first, and theory comes later as a result of reflection" (Van Manen 1990:15). Community-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) is based on the concept of praxis that is dialectical. It is a reflexive relationship, in which both action and reflection build on one another.

> In community-based research, it is the cycling through the iterations of action and reflection [that] creates praxis, and concomitantly generates evidence for future practice. This process grounds practice in theory, rather than applying theory to practice (Carrol, Hills and Mullett 2007:128).

Engagement in the process of research allows students and participants to develop new ways of thinking, behaving and practising. The paradigm of praxis/participation is central to the theory of PAR. As defined by Peter Reason, PAR is a 'coming to know,' rather than a formal, traditional research methodology. He defines PAR as a methodology for an alternative system of knowledge production, based on the people's role in setting the agendas, participating in data gathering and analysis, and in controlling the use of its outcomes. PAR emphasizes the political aspects of knowledge production, creating knowledge directly useful to a group of people. The research process involves full reciprocity, so that "each person's agency is fundamentally honoured, both in the exchange of ideas and in action" (Reason 2005: 324, 339). As this methodology has become widely adopted, it has in due course been revised. For instance, activist educator Ernest Stringer (1999, 2008) has expanded Reason's definition of PAR to include the key outcome of improving the quality of the lives of the participants. He writes: "Community-based action research is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems" (Stringer 1999:17).

Cultural Action for Change, a five-year arts-based community intervention, has adopted this framework in an attempt to link to people's history, culture, social practices and emotional lives. Such research seeks to shift the balance of the research situation so that it can enhance the lives of those who participate. Accordingly, Stringer and others have proposed that programs be evaluated not only according to their technical or functional worth, but also according to their impact on people's social and emotional lives. It is my contention that the emotional responses conveyed through narratives by participants in the course of PAR interventions are deepened through the use of visual arts methods, which provide a critical component when evaluating aspects of sustainability and resilience. Participatory Action Research methodology requires scholars to establish evaluative criteria that can measure the effects of the research on intangible values such as taking responsibility, building commitment and ownership, stimulating creativity and benefiting the public good. Value should also be given to human dignity, care, justice and interpersonal respect.

Context and background to Phumani Paper

When I began teaching at the former Technikon Witwatersrand (TWR) in the mid-1990s, the research arena was wide open, and the agenda for transformation had been initiated and supported by a progressive Dean. At that time, the National Research Foundation (NRF) funded research projects that had redress and community relevance as their key components. The research activity I initiated, papermaking for economic development, thrived in this environment. The government offered funding opportunities for research projects in the newly defined 'cultural industries' sector. Hand papermaking was one such industry, and the first two Master's students developing their research into hand papermaking, Bronwyn Marshall and Mandy Coppes, sought outside assistance from other disciplines and external experts in the field, as there was no precedent for this kind of research in South Africa. This opened the door to innovative knowledge production through collaboration and multi-disciplinary

methods of investigation. The broader context for Phumani Paper and Cultural Action for Change is developed in my PhD thesis (Berman 2009).

In 2000 I received a generous grant from the government to use research to create hundreds of new jobs in hand paper crafts. This Papermaking Poverty Relief Program became Phumani Paper. Furthermore the NRF awarded full research bursaries to four Master's students and support to four BTech students in this new activity area each year from 2000 to 2005. The program has since been renewed, with three new Master's students being supported in activist and community arts and four BTech students receiving support as research assistants annually.

The term 'cultural industries' was defined and framed by government in the White Paper for Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (1996). This area opened up new opportunities for research projects in the arts sector. In the absence of a pre-determined methodology for the research process, the creative space of inquiry and the drive to make a difference to the poorest of the poor facilitated a dynamic and fluid process of discovery. As a result my students and I operated in an environment that felt like a creative incubator that was non-prescriptive and was not policed by bureaucracy, nor constrained by academic conformity. We were allocated a basement venue in the deteriorating Marydale building on campus, where other faculty members refused to teach, as it flooded when it rained and was very cold in winter. Down in the basement my printmaking students worked not just at the grass roots, but in the muddy ditch of emerging knowledge, stripping bark off various plants and carefully recording the optimal procedures for turning those plants into paper. They proved to be outstanding researchers, and four master's student research projects have been essential to establishing sustainable processes within the Phumani Paper enterprise. These include the use of cotton and sisal for archival paper production (Marshall 2003), the use of invasive plant species for sustainable cultural development (Coppes 2003), and paper-based technologies such as paper-clay (Ladeira 2004) and cast paper pulp for three-dimensional craft production (Tshabalala 2005).

In sum, this project was engaged in research that was directly applicable to the public good. The stakes were high. The Department of Arts Culture Science and Technology (DACST) grant of R3 million tasked the research unit of the former TWR with establishing at least 460 new jobs in this new cultural industry in its first year of implementation. The teams consisted of postgraduate students, BTech research interns, papermakers with expertise, community facilitators (the regional co-coordinators hired by the Papermaking Poverty relief program (PPRP) to set up and manage the projects), and local community artists who all worked together There was no hierarchy of privilege or knowledge. White and black university students were learning with, and were supported by, their community-based counterparts in rural and township community centres. Knowledge was shared, methods experimented with and invented, and an exciting world of multidisciplinary and multicultural opportunities was opened up to all involved.

Subsequently, two of these Master's students (Coppes and Marshall) embarked on internships with the Agricultural Council to research plant fibres, and were awarded research grants to visit facilities in Belgium and Japan to study print and paper. Another Master's student (Terence Fenn) received a fellowship to Australia to do a Community Research Master's program in multi-media. Further, through the NRF Visiting Scientist/Mentor grants, I was able to arrange for all of the students and community artist collaborators to participate in intensive workshops with visiting expert papermakers from the United States, Europe and the Philippines, as well as a month-long intensive pineapple fibre training with a Japanese shifu-master. Further collaborations with papermakers from the United States as well as local artisans led to the design and construction of new equipment that was continually adapted to our evolving needs.

Each of the Master's students' research projects was involved in investigating and devising new technologies for craft development to enhance income generation within Phumani Paper projects. These research projects, while not designed specifically as Action Research investigations when they were initiated, exhibit the essential characteristics of Action Research in that they "improved the quality of the lives of the participants" and facilitated ways for people to reflect and act to address specific problems (Stringer 1999:17). The Papermaking Research and Development Unit's (PRDU) interdisciplinary approach was central to knowledge production, but unfortunately, interdisciplinarity was not welcomed in the increasingly conservative university climate. For some students, however, the risks associated with inter and cross-disciplinary collaborations were valuable. The first two Master's students developing their research into hand papermaking, Coppes and Marshall, established in-house links with the Departments of Engineering and Chemistry. These departments

assisted in assuring the use of proper scientific procedures, and recruited students for product development projects from Graphic Design and Industrial Design. The value of working across disciplines went further than expanding the knowledge base and capacities of all of the students concerned; most of them received funding, internships, travel opportunities and job placements through and beyond their studies. As researchers, these students were fully engaged and inspired by the challenge of their groundbreaking efforts in a new field and they produced substantial research. Each spent two to three years of dedicated energy in the field before setting out to write up their research findings in their Master's papers.

The guiding philosophy of all members in the PRDU embodied the values and ethics of collaborative, participative, and consultative processes that worked towards the empowerment and ownership of the research by community and university participants. The vision was to facilitate the establishment of micro-enterprises that could generate livelihoods for community members. In line with the government objectives of the funding for Phumani Paper, 21 hand papermaking projects were established in the first two years of implementation, between the end of 1999 and 2002. Currently in 2011, ten of these enterprises are still surviving with varying levels of success.

The students were not 'out there' researching 'the other', but attempting to co-design and co-produce new knowledge from local resource bases within each of the Phumani Paper groups. Each group had different needs, different local vegetation suitable for paper, and different degrees of access to resources such as electricity, water, transport, and raw materials. Each unit therefore needed particular attention to issues of design, technology and training that relied on the needs identified by the participants and trainers. All new paper and product research was transferred, tested and owned, or rejected, by the community participants. Our experience of what we termed at the time 'community-based research' was instinctive, experiential and imaginative. The success of this approach to research is reflected in the quality of the student/artist graduates. Most are still fully engaged in their own careers as educators, trainers, and/or community facilitators, passing on their commitment to using the arts for economic and social upliftment.

Cultural Action for Change

The Ford Foundation funded an intervention from July 2006 to 2008 that brought three organizations – Artist Proof Studio, a community art centre; Phumani Paper and the University of Johannesburg – together in an ambitious program. Following the submission of the impact assessment and findings, the Ford Foundation extended its funding for two further years to July 2010. The overarching program is titled Cultural Action for Change and has had three iterations over five years. An early pilot collaboration (which was separately funded) was undertaken by scholars and students from the University of Michigan in July 2005 and July 2006, and was called New Partners/New Knowledge. This was an intervention in six of the Phumani sites that implemented and tested the methodologies used in the subsequent AIDS Action program which was a two-year roll-out of the program to sixteen of the Phumani Paper sites from August 2006 to June 2008, which was titled the AIDS Action Intervention. In July 2008 the Ford Foundation funded an extension of this grant to include a broader outreach with a new methodology – community and visual mapping which linked to another Master's student's research (Hlasane 2008). Artist Proof Studio, active in HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns though the visual arts, subsequently used its trained teams to expand the outreach of this new phase into broader sectors, such as schools and support centres, using the methodologies developed in partnership with the University of Johannesburg and Phumani Paper. This third phase called Cultural Action for Change is the name that the program has also adopted to describe the whole five-year program.

Aims and objectives

The goal of the AIDS Action Intervention was to provide support to, and increase the agency of, participants of the Phumani Paper craft enterprises affected by the HIV pandemic. The great majority of these workers are women. The aim was to enable them to break the silence, to confront the fear and stigma of HIV, and to seek voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), thereby reducing the number of deaths in their projects and communities. This was an intensive intervention that aimed to provide support to the groups and individuals through the multi-modal workshops, to initiate awareness of the value of VCT, and to establish links with local clinics, counsellors and medical support. In this way each enterprise could gain the capacity to access support or refer others to support within their own

communities. The program did not claim to reduce the infection rates of HIV, but to reduce the fear and stigma surrounding the pandemic, so that the participants could act on options available to them. An additional objective was to achieve an increase in productivity and income for the enterprises as a result of greater group trust, information, networking and agency. The Phumani Paper program intervention aimed at empowering the groups themselves to better manage their enterprises, whereas the Phumani Paper national office and regional staff were challenged with investigating and accessing markets.

Finally, the academic component of Cultural Action for Change was structured to test the efficacy of participatory learning that employs students as researchers and teachers as well as learners through PAR methodology. What is gained academically from engaged learning? What is the unique role of the creative interventions of Photovoice and Paper Prayers in this process? The fundamental challenge the research teams faced in engaging research with Phumani Paper groups revolves around the following questions: How can this endeavour maintain an equal exchange of value and not result in exploitative power relationships? How does this research resist the perpetuation of the norm, which often involves researchers using institutional research resources to exploit a community to further their own career development?

The success of this research is dependent on its meeting the community development priorities. The project proposes that the visual arts can play a valuable role in connecting and integrating new knowledge transmitted from the community participants to the researcher, and in redefining the researcher as an activist and facilitator for catalysing social action. In sum, Cultural Action for Change bridges the divide between engaged, experiential and participative learning, and theoretically-based academic research.

AIDS action and gender: HIV and women's empowerment

The trauma experienced by the members of Phumani Paper rural projects across the country as a result of the illnesses and deaths resulting from HIV/AIDS was significant. The visually-based methodologies of Paper Prayers and Photovoice provide opportunities to 'break the silence' in a safe and supportive environment. For some groups the resistance to engaging in discussions about HIV and AIDS is initially high, and participants feel threatened to disclose or share their status for fear of gossip or marginalization. However, that fear dissipates when discussing a photograph or artwork which creates a mode for describing personal feelings in a non-threatening way. The conceptual view of using artistic methods in healing and teaching was corroborated strongly by various stakeholders in the program, such as those involved at a program level as trainers, coordinators and managers. As one HIV counsellor stated:

> 'It has done so in a way I never expected. I have seen the most powerful articulations of HIV-related issues than in any other intervention I engaged in.' and '... if empowerment means being able to make more choices, then yes, I think these interventions contribute to empowerment' (Du Toit report 2007).

Methodology

The approach of PAR is the grounding principle of the methodology of the AIDS Action interventions in that the knowledge systems, inquiry skills and validation procedures are structured to ensure and enhance the quality of knowing. This capacity of knowing is core to initiating social change that emerges from the community participants.

The multi-disciplinary approach does much to 'ground' the social sciences, (such as sociology, anthropology and development studies) in reality, because each discipline adds value to another. In the AIDS Action intervention the research team found that all of the stakeholders regarded interdisciplinary collaboration very favourably, not only for their own practice, but also for the growth of their students and trainees. Mitchell argues that visual arts-based methodologies have potential both for engaging people in finding solutions, and for deepening understanding of the interplay of knowledge, behaviour and attitudes within a social context. She asserts: "This work forces us to look again at what the purpose of research in the social and human sciences in South Africa should be, and how it should be evaluated. Can it provoke change? Can it afford not to?" (Mitchell 2006:240).

For the purposes of this article, multi-disciplinary research is not simply cross-disciplinary within the academy, but multi-sectoral, cross-cultural and multi-modal, in that it involves many sectors of society in engaged, interactive endeavours using a range of methods to foster social change. The team of researchers, artists and community activists worked from the assumption that visual and cultural literacies could compensate for the possibly limited ability amongst many participants to express thoughts and ideas using a linguistic voice.

Visual methodologies: Photovoice, Paper Prayers and community mapping

The creative strategies that the research teams used for the AIDS Action intervention were Photovoice and Paper Prayers. Photovoice uses the photographs made by individuals in the community to produce narratives about their lives (Wang and Buris 1997). Paper Prayers, introduced as a nationwide campaign for HIV/AIDS awareness by Artist Proof Studio in 1998, uses simple printmaking techniques to encourage individuals to express their emotions about loss and illness. Paper Prayers workshops have proved to be an effective method of teaching AIDS awareness, sexual practice and behaviour change using artistic methods. The use of two different visual strategies helped to ensure that the majority of the participants found a vehicle to articulate their concerns, fears and visions for the future. The rationale for the choice of these two methodologies was based on the proven record of success they had demonstrated in other applications. Community mapping is used as a visual tool in the third phase of the intervention. This methodology has been adapted to develop action plans for improved access to healthcare and to resources and markets for the enterprises. The action plans are translated into a visual process of wall-mapping, onto which a range of images, texts, photographs, references and action plans are collaged. The mural map in each enterprise provides a very direct way of monitoring change and increased productivity.

Assessment methods

The rationale for the Cultural Action for Change intervention is linked to the quest to provide evidence to support the contention that the visual arts are a valuable tool for creating social change. The program has developed a range of methods to evaluate impact, because the measuring of impact is often a challenge for arts-based programs. Funding agencies want to know that their funding criteria have been met, and the academy wants to know that the research is credible and verifiable, and that scientific research procedures are being followed. The Ford Foundation funding facilitated the contracting of an independent social science researcher to use the discipline's 'hard data' approach to measure impact alongside the 'softer' arts-based participatory methods of visual arts activities such as the use of Photovoice and Paper Prayers to generate narratives. This mixture of approaches has come together in the latest intervention through the use of tools such as social and visual mapping and can be used by each community site to monitor and manage their own research data linked to action plans.

Some findings: visual outcomes as research evidence

The results of the pilot project demonstrated that artistic forms of expression such as Photovoice and Paper Prayers offer a rich and intense form of inquiry, and are effective in facilitating the expression of voices that have not been heard.

Artists are not generally trained in data collection and analysis, but I have found that visual methods of engaging creative thinking provide a useful means of gathering documentary evidence. The resulting materials and outcomes enable both the researchers and participants to analyse and draw useful findings from the themes elicited by the narratives. The visual narratives from the pilot and subsequent roll-out of the interventions in each of the sixteen sites have been collated and archived. Some of the visual and narrative texts have been included in the needs assessment compiled by the contract researcher Lilo Du Toit, from the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Johannesburg; some have been included in the site workbooks and others published in an exhibition catalogue of visual voices (Antonopolou, Berman and Sellschop 2008). In aggregate, they demonstrate a marked increase in the Phumani Paper women's awareness and empowerment around issues of HIV/AIDS. In addition, the project exemplifies Amartya Sen's notion that the leadership of women is a crucial aspect of 'development as freedom' (Sen 1999: 202), as, in addition to providing information to assist HIV-positive women in choosing options for treatment and

counselling, this intervention focused on the changing agency of women that derives from also improving their economic and social conditions.

The research methodology, Participatory Action Research, provided a recognized and progressive research context for students and facilitators, and helped secure a successful pilot project. Close collaboration between the facilitators and the project members ensured that knowledge production remained non-hierarchical and that the members' voices were accurately recorded.

The baseline and mid-term impact assessments have also opened up a range of opportunities for continuing research. For example, four Master's research projects under the community-based arts activity area expand on the research activity that investigates the roles of the visual arts in creating social change. Other examples of cross-disciplinary collaboration include participation by the Faculty of Humanities students. Dr Naude Malan from the University of Johannesburg's Department of Development Studies Department has introduced an honours module on participatory democracy. During the course, first initiated in 2008, each honours student investigates particular organizational structures of a local Phumani Paper craft enterprise and their levels of economic participation of the groups though arts and culture.

The success of the AIDS Action Intervention met the objectives of the Ford Foundation grant of reducing the fear and silence in each site, and I am aware of four HIV status disclosures that took place during the training interventions of members of groups who previously felt shame and had kept their HIV status private from the groups. Others in the groups who qualified for anti-retroviral treatment have initiated treatment since the intervention. An additional objective that was proposed to the Ford Foundation was to achieve an increase in productivity and income for the enterprises as a result of greater group trust, information, networking and agency. The increase in income however has not as yet proven to be consistent (Du Toit 2007: 38). This subsequently led to the funding and program support for the next phase of the intervention, to improve market access and increased productivity for Phumani groups leading up to 2010.

Conclusion

The decade of research activity of the PRDU has led to five successful years of intervention under the umbrella of Cultural Action for Change. In 2011 the NRF established a new knowledge field called the Community Engagement Programme (CEP) and has funded my research programme of arts-based approaches to development for three years (2011-2013). This project consists of a community engaged learning and research module for the BTech Visual Arts programme. In 2011 a group of ten BTech students elected to participate in multi-disciplinary collaboration using Photovoice, Paper Prayers and mural painting with schools and clinics in a rural poverty node called HaMakuya village in Limpopo Province. This opportunity consolidates and expands participatory and cross-disciplinary approaches of arts-based methods for community research and engagement. The case of Cultural Action for Change demonstrates that these approaches inspire the capacities for mutual learning and exchange, planning actions that transform silence and isolation into articulated goals and promote agency for personal and social change.

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Short Biography

Kim Berman is an Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Art at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Executive Director of Artist Proof Studio (APS), a community-based printmaking centre in Newtown which she co-founded with the late Nhlanhla Xaba in 1991. She founded Phumani Paper as a community engagement initiative of the University of Johannesburg in 2000 which still supports craft enterprises in handmade paper and crafts across South Africa, including the Phumani Archival papermaking Mill at the UJ. She received her PhD at the University of Witwatersrand in 2009.