

Editorial: Critical perspectives on digital spaces in educational research

Naydene de Lange

Claudia Mitchell

Relebohile Moletsane

Globally, the digital is encroaching, reformulating, and recreating spaces in contemporary society (Kalantzis-Cope & Gherab-Martin, 2010). This is so in South Africa with the various applications of the digital having their roots in different places and spaces. Historically, we can look back to the development of portable video technology in the late 1960s in Canada. Organised through the National Film Board of Canada, a group of filmmakers initiated a new approach to documentary film production, engaging communities themselves in the process of filmmaking (Rusted, 2010). The Fogo method, as it came to be called (named after Fogo Island, Newfoundland, where it was first used), was part of the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle program. It brought together government, filmmakers, activists, and communities to address poverty through documentary film production and distribution (Baker, Waugh & Winton, 2010). It is worth noting that the Fogo method of participatory video was transported to South Africa in the late 1970s (Cain, 2009). This work became a significant part of anti-apartheid activism, especially in the Eastern and Western Cape (pers. comm. Lou Haysom). As Cain (2003) writes in her doctoral study of participatory video that focuses on housing, water, and sanitation in communities in Eastern Cape:

Challenge for Change delegates came to South Africa in the late 1970s and met with anti-apartheid community activists and leaders to promote their approach to filmmaking. As recounted by Maingard, this visit “had a significant impact on the development of South African documentary filmmaking” (1998, p. 35) and resulted in Canadian funds being given to initiate the Community Video Resource Association (CVRA) at the University of Cape Town, which later

Naydene de Lange
Nelson Mandela
Metropolitan University
Faculty of Education
Naydene.delange@nmmu.ac.za

Claudia Mitchell
McGill University
Faculty of Education
Department of Integrated
Studies in Education
Claudia.mitchell@mcgill.ca

Relebohile
MoletsaneUniversity
KwaZulu-Natal
School of Education
Moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za

became independent and was re-named Community Video Education Trust (CVET), still in operation today. (103)

Four decades later, new media technology has become more accessible, more personal, and more connected through digital communication networks (Graham, Laurier, O'Brien & Rouncefield, 2011) and social media, with mobile technology playing a key role, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. As Buckingham and Willett (2009) observe in their work which carefully traces the evolution of video culture taking into account the various iterations of the camcorder, these developments have important implications especially for those studying youth culture and working with young people, and in the context of a DIY (do it yourself) media culture. But, as the various contributors to this issue of *Perspectives in Education* highlight, these developments have important implications for educational research such as bridging the digital divide, particularly in lower and middle income countries where access to digital resources and services, and human capacity to take advantage of them, are scarce (World Bank, 2013). Additionally, we need to consider the role that formal and informal education (with teachers, young people, and communities) needs to play in a digital age. Such participatory visual methods and tools as photovoice, digital storytelling, participatory video and cellphilmimg, digital animation, and digital archiving have the potential to alter how we conduct research, with whom, for what purposes, and for which outcomes.

This Special Issue focuses on the possibilities and challenges that this technology is bringing to researchers to engage teachers, learners, community members, departments of education, and governments in educational research. The fundamental question asked in the issue is this: "How can the digital spaces afforded by new media technology and social media be used to address issues in educational research?" The issue seeks to facilitate dialogue among researchers who explore digital spaces so as to gain deeper and more critical insight into the possibilities of taking up research in such spaces. It looks at how digital spaces afforded by new media technology and social media contribute to addressing issues in education. The exploration of ways in which researchers are using portable digital devices such as cellular phones, iPads, digital cameras and so on, in their work is carried out along a consideration of how these technologies, in turn, address issues of educational access and success in resource-poor settings in particular. It examines the possibilities and challenges of visual methodologies, including ethical challenges, in addressing issues in education in digital spaces and looks at the implications of exploring digital spaces in policy development in the context of education, and at the potential of digital spaces to reveal gender-, class-, place-, and race-based inequities and inequalities and how educational research focused on digital spaces might address these inequities. It considers how educational research in digital spaces might influence teacher education and how the latter might influence the former along with an exploration of the potential democratizing features of research in digital spaces for youth and community members. Universities taking steps to become digital are discussed along with the implications involved in rural-based learners accessing higher education.

This Special Issue offers ten articles from both local and international scholars. All the articles, except one, draw on fieldwork undertaken in South Africa, in rural and urban areas, with primary school children, secondary school children, and with both pre-service and in-service teachers.

The issue begins with an article that interrogates the very nature of power in working with the digital in participatory visual research. Using visual participatory methods does not in itself address power imbalances in the research process, as Casey Burkholder, Mona Makramalla, Ehaab Abdou, Nazeeha Khoja, and Fatima Khan in their article, “Why study power in digital spaces anyway? Considering Power and Participatory visual Methods” point out. Building on the work of key theorists, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Michel Foucault, and Paulo Friere, the authors explore how the operation of power dynamics in the use of drawing, photovoice, and participatory video using cellphones might be uncovered and interrogated.

The next three articles deal with the issue of what the digital has to do with teacher education (both pre-service and in-service) and how teachers and teacher educators are implicated in the digital. In their article, “Connecting with pre-service teachers’ perspectives on the use of digital technologies and social media to teach socially relevant science”, Ronika Mudaly, Kathleen Pithouse, Linda Van Laren, Shakila Singh and Claudia Mitchell consider the effectiveness of using digital animation and a structured mindmap activity with pre-service science teachers. Here the use of digital technology is described in terms of the 4 C’s—cheap, convenient, collaborative, and creative—in a variety of learning contexts.

The article by Katie MacEntee and April Mandrona, “From discomfort to collaboration: Teachers screening cellfilms in a rural South African school”, in which they use Boler’s framework of a pedagogy of discomfort, draws on the use of cellphones by in-service teachers to create video responses to an HIV- and AIDS-related issue as a way of addressing barriers to teacher-implemented HIV education.

Carmel Chetty’s article, “The SenseCam as a research tool for exploring learner experiences in an urban classroom space”, uses photographic evidence obtained through the use of a SenseCam that she and the class teachers, in turn, wore to capture images of the daily school life experiences of impoverished grade 6 learners in an urban school in Durban. She reflects on the value of the SenseCam in doing research that illustrates the ways in which the learners negotiated the numerous and complex social networks and relationships in their daily activities in and around schools.

The next three articles highlight the ways in which young people are engaged in the use of digital media in school and institutional settings. In their article, “Community-based participatory video: Exploring and advocating for girls’ resilience”, Tamlynn Jefferis and Linda Theron reflect critically on the value of using community-based participatory video to explore resilience in adolescent girls and to advocate for ways

to support and advance this process. The authors conclude by highlighting just how difficult it is to realise the social change potential of community-based participatory video.

Thoko Mnisi, in “Digital Storytelling: Creating participatory space, addressing stigma, and enabling agency”, focuses on the way in which she used digital storytelling to create a critical space of participation and, in so doing, enable her secondary school learner participants to identify and address issues related to HIV- and AIDS-related stigma as well as enabling them to take charge of effecting change in their community. She points out that her fieldwork led her to think more critically about the use of digital storytelling.

In her article, “Young People being Literate in a Digital Space: What can textspeak tell us?”, Lisa Wiebesiek discusses a novel produced by the FunDza Literacy Trust as one of the texts written for a young adult audience that are made available via Mxit, a cellular telephone-based social networking platform, and some of the textspeak responses of anonymous users to this text. She argues that the interactive discussion platform is invaluable for developing critical literacy about important issues that affect young people’s lives, such as gender and sexuality, agency, and risk and vulnerability.

Laurel Hart and Claudia Mitchell extend the work related to mobile culture beyond the school setting and into other social and geographic spaces of rural life. In so doing they look, in their article, “From spaces of sexual violence to sites of networked resistance: Re-imagining mobile and social media technologies”, at how various apps might be used to deal with or resist violence (both offline and online).

Continuing a consideration of the digital in broader areas of community education, Jenny Doubt, in her article, “Digitising and archiving HIV and AIDS in South Africa: The Museum of AIDS in Africa as an archival intervention”, looks at the effectiveness of a digital archive set up to address different issues related to HIV and AIDS. She argues that this museum has the potential to function as an archival intervention through its accessibility to the often marginalised communities, as well as by enabling those affected by HIV and AIDS to contribute to the archival digital content.

Finally, we as guest editors, in our visual essay, “Seeing how it works: A visual essay about critical and transformative research in education”, test out ways of using the visual to shift thinking about what it means to do educational research that is transformative in and of itself. We show the possibilities of using the visual, not only as a mode of inquiry, but also of representation and communication in education and social science scholarship.

The articles in this Special Issue together point to the potential of digital tools and digital spaces to not only uncover, explore, interrogate or consider various issues addressed in educational research reported in the articles, but also to advance critical perspectives in the analyses of this work. It is our view as guest editors of this Special Issue that the articles demonstrate the value of the digital in facilitating the kinds of

dialogues necessary for researchers to gain new insights into challenges in education, and into some of the possibilities for change in taking up research in digital spaces. From such insights, stakeholders such as teachers, learners, community members, NGOs, government departments, including the departments of education and others, should be able to identify and develop strategies for addressing challenges at the various levels of education.

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