Editorial

Anyway, what difference does this make? Arts-based methodologies in addressing HIV&AIDS

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As academics we are fond of saying, “This study raises more questions than it can answer.” Indeed, the more we do, the more we realise just how many new questions emerge, and so it is with the impact of arts-based methodologies in addressing HIV&AIDS. We start with the questions posed by Make art stop AIDS, an art installation that has travelled the world, including South Africa, raising awareness about the AIDS pandemic through the visual arts such as photography, sculptures, paintings, video with sound, dresses made of condoms, digital photographs, interactive computer media, and beadwork. The two main questions the installation raises are: “How can art be a tool of education and information sharing?” and “Can art save lives?” (Not alone—An international project of Make Art/Stop AIDS, 2009). These questions very much reflect the wide-spread use of visual and other arts-based research worldwide as can be seen in the work of many international scholars such as Wang (1999); Pink (2001); Banks (2001), Cole and Knowles (2008); and Margolis and Pauwels (2011). Applied specifically to addressing HIV&AIDS, there is a growing use of the visual and arts-based methodologies—something that is evident at the biennial International AIDS conferences where installations of condom dresses and other fashions, AIDS memorial quilts, photo exhibitions and other artistic endeavours are displayed. This work on the visual and other arts-based methods has been taken up by a number of researchers and practitioners in South Africa, including the ground-breaking work on the uses of performance and theatre in addressing HIV and AIDS of the late Lynn Dalrymple (2006) to whom we dedicate this issue of Educational Research for Social Change.

In our research, we, the editors, have been engaging, for close to a decade, in the study and use of visual methods as applied to gender and HIV and AIDS, and using approaches such as photovoice, participatory video and drawing. Much of this work has been done collaboratively with other colleagues, including Jean Stuart, Kathleen Pithouse, Linda van Laren, Lesley Wood, Myra Taylor, Tilla Olivier and others. In this visual work, often in rural contexts, we have tested out various innovations in the area of participatory video, adapting, for example, storyboarding to serve as a visual tool in and of itself rather than just one step in the
process of participatory video-making (Mitchell, De Lange, Moletsane, 2011; Labacher, Mitchell, De Lange, Moletsane & Geldenhuys, 2012). We have also designed and developed a new tool—the No Editing Required (NER) approach to participatory video—that enables even those in rural areas with limited access to electricity the opportunity to make, screen, and view a video in a day (see Mitchell & De Lange, 2011). Following from this work we have conceptualised and refined the production of the composite video, a term we coined to describe the ‘video of videos’, video productions that include contextual scenes of a particular video-making project as well as the compilation of the videos produced by the participants as a way to contribute to sustainability (see Mitchell, 2011; De Lange & Mitchell, 2012). As part of this work on participatory video we have begun to test out the use of cellphones in film-making (see Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2012) in a context in which almost everyone has access to a cellphone (but not a video camera). Cutting across our work with drawings, photos, and videos, we have been experimenting with the participatory analysis of visual data through digital archiving as a way to both ‘give life’ to data and to democratise the research process (De Lange, Mnisi, Mitchell & Park, 2010; De Lange and Mitchell, 2012). But these innovations are not ever for their own sake—they are concerned with whether or not they make a significant difference to the conditions—physical, psychological, social, educational and so on—under which participants live. But how does this work link to overall well-being?

The questions posed by the Make art stop AIDS installation, and in the innovations noted above are central to the articles in this issue of Educational Research for Social Change. They are ones that we have begun to take up in a variety of contexts. For example, we convened an invitational conference What difference does this make? The arts, youth and HIV&AIDS, at Salt Rock, in KwaZulu-Natal, on December 4-5, 2011. Our purpose in doing so was to explore questions such as: “How can we know what difference arts-based research makes in the context of HIV and AIDS?” and “What kind of evidence do we need to show that it makes a difference?

Another event at which this issue of “What difference does it make?” was posed was in September 2010, at a national discussion, Can art stop AIDS? Exploring the impact of visual and arts-based participatory methodologies. The event, hosted by the Research Chair in HIV&AIDS Education at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, aimed to explore what researchers using arts-based methodologies in the field of HIV and AIDS were doing to determine what difference their research-as-intervention makes. One of the critical aspects of the national discussion was getting the researchers and practitioners to think about their work in the broad field of visual and arts-based research and to think about ways of categorisation, which might be useful in conceptualising the field. Three categories emerged: (1) Hand-made work, (2) Digital Media, and (3) Performance-based work. Each group’s responses to questions regarding what methodologies they use, why they use these, what their experiences of using the methods were, and what thinking underpinned their research, was useful to showing the range of arts-based work the participants engaged in as well as the challenges they experienced around studying the impact of this work.

The Hand-made work group highlighted the use of drawings (simple, metaphorical), print-making (paper prayers), story-boarding (drawings to document role play), video, collage, hero books, memory boxes, body mapping, photo albums, murals, installations, graffiti, embroidery, crafts, quilting/memory, beading, and so on. There were many reasons offered for using these approaches: the level of participation (fun, therapeutic process, agency, skill development); the possibility of exploring with and observing participants; the impact of the process; the impact of the production; and the impact of dissemination. Participants noted that the visual impact was immediate and powerful and that it made room for the expression of emotion and perceptions across languages.

The Digital Media group made use of such tools and approaches as photovoice, digital storytelling, participatory video, digital archiving, blogging, social media and cell phones. Their reasons for using digital media included the following: it has social impact; it makes critical information more accessible to youth (often their target audience in HIV and AIDS work); it promotes engagement; it makes voices/ideas/
paradigms heard; it allows engagement in the process through reflection and decision-making, it provides a powerful message; and documents the lived experiences of the participants.

The *Performance* group drew on the use of music, dance, theatre-in-education, forum theatre, image theatre, role-play and the use of performance as a springboard for discussion, and then on performance as an end in itself. Their reasons for using performance included the following: research and education purposes; the facilitation of reflection; and the notion that the anecdotal has value (narrative storytelling).

All three arts-based research groupings considered questions such as the following: “Does arts-based research achieve its purposes?”; “What are the intended and unintended effects?”; “What are the consequences of the research as intervention?”; and “What transformational value does it have?” While the participants in these three groups were from different disciplines such as education, drama, art, dance, cultural studies, media studies, and language, there were common questions and issues which worked across the disciplines: “What kind of ‘studies’ or projects are we engaged in (Transformative studies? Social change studies? Participatory studies? Participatory engagement Studies? Arts-based evaluation?)”

Clearly the three categories of arts-based research identified at the national discussion are by no means exhaustive, and as a group we recognised that literary genres, for example, might fall under one or more categories, or may represent a separate category. However, what was evident is that the focus of arts-based research is more than research: it is centered around a social change agenda. Coming together to reflect on visual and arts-based work, particularly the evaluation thereof, as a new knowledge field, provided the community of visual and arts-based researchers with the opportunity to shift the knowledge generation paradigm towards research which is not only creative, or participatory (participant co-creation), but which has a transformative/social change agenda. This type of research is crucial in the African and South African context, and particularly in the age of AIDS, and has the potential to shift the discourses of research.

In trying to think about what draws the work together in the field of HIV and AIDS, the participants in the *Can art stop AIDS* discussion concluded that there is an urgency to determine what difference our research makes and that a way forward would be to establish an agenda organised around a set of common questions:

- How might visual and arts-based research contribute to the health and well-being of participants?
- Does the work have the potential to be transformative? How do we study its transformative potential?
- To what extent does the work contribute to social change and social justice?
- What is the value of the creative processes and the use of imagination in HIV and AIDS research as intervention for and with the community?
- In what ways is the research democratising?
- Does the research have long term impact and how do we study this?
- How easily/quickly does the research get to the community with whom the research is done in order to bring about change? How does the work get to change policy?
• How is participatory analysis engaging the community in analysing the meaning and what does this do for the community?

• What would longitudinal studies in arts-based research look like?

• Whose voices can be heard that have not been heard before?

• How does the work influence the paradigms and discourses of research?

• How do researchers and communities engage in productive dialogue?

The questions continue: About the articles in this issue of ERSC

The contributions to this issue of ERSC go some way, we think, in shedding new light on the questions raised at the Invitational Conference, What difference does this make? and at the National Discussion Can art stop AIDS? As noted above, we dedicate this issue of ESRC to the memory of Lynn Dalrymple, the pioneer of theatre and AIDS Education in South Africa who died earlier this year. Here we re-publish a tribute AIDS theatre’s maestro dies, written by Emma Durden (2012) which appeared in the Health Supplement of the Mail & Guardian.

This tribute is followed by six peer reviewed articles that address in one form or another the question, “What difference does this make?”. Fittingly, the first article, ‘Even today they call him Induna’: Theatre, empowerment, and making a difference, also written by Emma Durden, offers an example of performance in arts-based research. The article draws on her theatre work in the “Man-to-Man” drama project conducted in the Umdoni district on the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) South Coast, exploring current thinking about the notion of participation in applied theatre projects and what difference it makes. Informed by the theoretical underpinnings of Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, Durden examines the significance of participation in applied theatre projects. The article concludes that participation in the project had a profound impact on the participants, and that such projects can have an empowering effect on those involved in them. But Durden is concerned with the taken-for-granted notions of participation in research and interventions as ‘good’ and ‘empowering’ for individuals and communities who are involved in them. In this regard, the article responds to such questions as: “What is participation?”; “How and when do we know when it is achieved?”; and “In what ways (if any) does it benefit the participants?”

Through work that falls under the Digital Media category, in the second article titled, Social networking practices and youth advocacy efforts in HIV awareness and prevention: What does methodology have to do with it? Claudia Mitchell and John Murray explore social networking practices in relation to sexual health among youth. To do this, they take the example of YAHAnet.org, a global social networking platform that promotes the arts as a critical tool for youth in the AIDS response. Extending the debate from participation to engagement, their article explores the ways in which a variety of online and offline tools and procedures might be applied to studying youth engagement in relation to HIV advocacy and prevention. It focuses specifically on methodological issues, particularly the use of digital media and social networking spaces for engaging youth in informing policy and interventions targeting HIV prevention internationally. In particular, this exploration considers how through social networking tools and the data produced through online discussions within a youth-as-protagonist framework, young people themselves might inform such policies and interventions.

In the third article ‘Having a say’: Urban adolescent girls narrating their visions of future through photovoice, Lisa Vaughn, Vicky Stieha, Melissa Muchmore, Stephanie Thompson, Jessica Lang and Maria Lang, write about using photovoice with urban adolescent immigrant and minority girls in the Midwest United States. The methodology, also part of Digital Media, enabled the authors to explore the tensions
between the girls’ visions of their futures and their struggles to attain these, but also to recognise their need for a safe space to engage in dealing with such tensions, an issue that the arts-based approach opened up. Acknowledging the complex terrain in which girls in general, and girls from immigrant and other minority groups in the country have to develop and perform their identities, and the consequent intricacies involved in interventions and programmes that target them in schools and communities, reporting on a participatory arts-based study, the article analyses how the use of such strategies as photovoice can enable girls to construct and communicate their future visions for themselves, their school and their world. Categorising the girls’ productions into picturing themselves, and picturing their school and their communities, the authors argue that such photo-narratives highlight the need for a safe and enabling space for girls to communicate their concerns about issues they face, what they envision for their futures and the barriers they come across in schools and communities in their journeys to such futures.

Similarly, in the fourth article, Kim Berman and Shoshana Zeldner, in An arts-based collaborative intervention to promote medical male circumcision as a South African HIV and AIDS prevention strategy, interrogate the value of arts-based methods as a catalysing and enabling strategy for social communication in advocacy campaigns targeting, among other issues, HIV prevention. In particular, the article addresses the extent to and ways in which an arts-based learning intervention can be regarded as transformative specifically with regard to student understandings and uptake of Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) as an HIV prevention strategy. The intervention, a collaborative project between Artist Proof Studio, a community art centre, and Sonke Gender Justice, a gender advocacy organisation, involved art students in activities aimed at developing a communication strategy for the promotion of MMC. The article analyses the extent to and ways in which the intervention enabled students to shift their understandings of MMC as an HIV prevention strategy, but also to use such understandings, and through the visual arts, develop an appropriate communication strategy for the promotion of the uptake of MMC among young people in educational institutions and communities in South Africa. Premised on the notion of youth in general and students in particular as change agents, the article concludes that the use of the visual arts not only functioned as a catalyst in shifting the students’ understandings and views on MMC, but also as an enabling strategy for social communication in the context of HIV and AIDS in South Africa.

Nokukhanya Ngcobo, in the fifth article titled, Yesterday as a study for tomorrow: on the use of film texts in addressing gender and HIV and AIDS with secondary school youth in KwaZulu-Natal, reports on a study exploring Grade 11 learners’ responses to gender representations in the context of HIV and AIDS, in the 2004 South African film, Yesterday. The film depicts a woman’s lived experiences in relation to being infected and affected by HIV and AIDS, describing her fears and hopes for her daughter. Informed by feminist and critical literacy frameworks, and using Yesterday as an entry point, Ngcobo explores how a group of Grade 11 learners responded to gender representations in the film in the reading and comprehension activities she engaged them in. The article concludes that film analysis, particularly when it is informed by feminist theories and theories of critical literacy, has the potential to develop intellectual and critical thinking skills among learners as tools for navigating the complex terrain of gender and HIV and AIDS in South Africa.

The sixth and final article, This thing called the future: Intergenerationality and HIV and AIDS, by Barbara Hunting, explores the idea of intergenerationality in addressing youth and HIV and AIDS. Drawing on an analysis of a literary text, This Thing Called the Future, a young adult novel written by Stephanie Powers (2011), Hunting examines some of the ways in which a critical reading of literary texts may contribute to deepening our understanding of HIV and AIDS and the ways in which it affects different generations in families and communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Using an interpretative framework as used in the novel itself, the author highlights the complex ways in which generational opportunities to education, employment, and social change overlap to produce and reproduce power imbalances in the context of gendered and intergenerational relationships in families and communities faced with the challenges of HIV and AIDS.
Tabitha Mukeredzi’s conference report on the invitational symposium, *What difference does this make? The arts, youth and HIV&AIDS*, held in 2011, complements the debates raised in the six visual and arts-based articles in this issue. The six themes of the conference (Fire and Hope, Participatory Visual Methodologies, Performance Art, Digital Media in the Age of AIDS, Arts-based Methods and What Difference does this make?) also point to the breadth of visual and arts-based work in South Africa. Attended by both researchers and youth as knowledge producers and participants of the various research projects and interventions, this event marked the 10th anniversary of the beginning of the sponsoring research group’s involvement in the use of participatory visual methodologies in addressing HIV and AIDS.

Rounding off the issue is Christa Beyers’ review of the recently published: *Picturing research, Drawing as visual methodology*, edited by Linda Theron, Claudia Mitchell, Ann Smith and Jean Stuart (2011). Drawing, as noted earlier, forms part of *Hand-made work* in our inventory of categories of arts-based practice. This book aptly explores and explains drawing as research methodology and is an extremely useful and welcome addition to the visual and arts-based researcher’s toolkit.

This ERSC issue on art-based research is not a definitive offering of visual and other arts-based research, but does open up the discussion for visual and arts-based research making a difference and contributing to social change in the age of HIV and AIDS.

**References**


