"We grew as we grew": visual methods, social change and collective learning over time

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Educational research using visual methods has the power to transform the society in which we live and the communities in which we work. We must not naïvely imagine that having the desire *to make change in people's lives will mean that it will happen, as sometimes there may be surprising, unintended negative repercussions as well. Other constraints, such as structural violence and institutional racism, can also intersect with the possibility of making tangible change through educational research using visual methods. Qualitative assessment with a longitudinal approach is one approach that can reveal both the impact, and the limitations, of educational research on social change. I discuss these issues through grounded examples from an HIV educational project that used visual methodologies with a group of youths in Cape Town, South Africa over a number of years. Almost ten years later we interviewed three of the former participants about what impact the work has had on their lives. Each has travelled a different journey and been faced with different constraints that have implications for the effectiveness of such work. Where are they now, and as adults, what do they have to say about the visual methodologies, memory, and social change?*

Introduction

As Bren Neale writes, "time is a complex and endlessly fascinating phenomenon, not simply the medium through which we do research, but an important topic of enquiry in its own right" (Neale, 3:2010). Indeed, we often do not have a chance to gain insight over time on the educational research we have undertaken. Time is a significant marker of change, and looking at the elements of what remains allows research to take on an entirely new form. Longitudinal assessment itself can pose problems, as questions of memory, perception, and the continual rewriting of our own biographies come into play. Of course, it is impossible to precisely isolate the impacts of a particular educational project from the multitude of factors that shape any one person's life. These are significant obstacles in assessing effects through the lifespan of participants. Yet, questions remain: In what ways do experiences with educational, visual research for social change remain with participants over the course of their lives? What can we learn from taking a longitudinal approach to educational research? These questions form the basis for a preliminary investigation into the longitudinal impact of educational research using visual methodologies conducted with a group of young people from Cape Town, South Africa.

Whilst a small project like the one I outline below cannot make any definitive claims, I

hope these reflections provide some insight into the impact over time of visual and educational research that takes a participant-led approach. Longitudinal viewpoints that focus on life stories also highlight the political nature of educational research and how race, gender, class and other structural factors are critical considerations (Shirani & Weller, 2010; Neale, 2010). The balance must be maintained between an understanding that individual change is not alone sufficient, while at the same time valuing the wider transformative potential of educational work in people's lives and communities.

Background of the Soft Cover Project

The background of this project begins 10 years ago. In 2002 Professor Claudia Mitchell and I ran a series of visual, educational and creative workshops with a small group of young South Africans aimed at understanding their perceptions about HIV and AIDS, beginning with a youth-centred conference at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town.[1] The project was called "Soft Cover" and brought together young people with known visual artists, people living with AIDS, health practitioners, educators, graffiti artists and writers, in an attempt to enliven HIV prevention efforts and to break the stigma of AIDS. It was the beginning of work with a group of around 50 racially diverse young people from Atlantis, Khayelitsha, Retreat and Rondebosch, and it included creative writing workshops, participatory film-making projects, poetry, painting, interviews, ethnographic and qualitative visual research which continued over the next decade.[2] The project was most active between 2002–2005, and at the core were 15–20 young people who participated actively in all the various projects throughout the first three years. The group would meet on a weekly basis at first, and later on, particular projects initiated by the young people would run for a number of weeks once a year.[3] Of the core group, around eight participants continued to keep in touch with each other on a semi-regular basis on their own initiative. Over this period my research methods incorporated formal and informal interviews, ethnographic observation, and visual methods such as drawing, painting, creative writing and filmmaking. For this article I draw on data that were collected in one-on-one interviews I conducted with three of the original participants in 2011, as well as text from writing workshops done in 2003 and video-taped interviews from 2004.

The initial hunger with which young people wanted to tell their stories, to speak from their experiences, perceptions, curiosities, and fears about AIDS were intense. Their desire to speak to each other over race, gender and class lines was inspiring, as it was to watch how much they learned from each other. In those initial sessions, workshops and interviews, they explored questions of sexuality, gender, politics, community, friendship, race, privilege and poverty as related to their perceptions about HIV and AIDS. The narratives they wrote in writing workshops attested to an unshakable hope – even in the face of grim realities and growing HIV infection rates and deaths. As Thozamile Vanto wrote in the published text "*In My Life*", which was created as part of writing workshops we conducted in 2003:

> I grew up in the township called Gugulethu in the 1980s. That time was during the Apartheid era, and there was a lot of criminal activity in my life … I didn't stop my criminal activities when we moved away from Gugs and went to Khayelitsha. I continued to have street fights, and sometimes we stole goods.
>
> Then something happened to change my life completely. My best friend told me she was HIV-positive …
>
> It was a time of change, and something changed about me. She made me understand life and about HIV and AIDS, and other issues ... I quit lots of things, and I took a big step

in my life and quit being in a gang …

> Since that day I never looked back again. I'm still supporting her all the way through giving her love, care, understanding, openness, acceptance (Schuster, 2003:63).

Our goals, back in 2002, were quite modest, but as the relationships, commitment and excitement around the project grew we found ourselves watching a process unfold over a much longer period of time. The idea of tracing the lives of the participants was one that emerged organically. The Soft Cover Project, at first meant as a one-off series of workshops, quickly took on a life of its own as the experience of learning together continued to be exciting for everyone involved, and became increasingly more collaborative and participant led. As time passed, promising parts of our earlier assessments had to be rethought and placed in context as the economic, political and social environments in which the young people lived took their toll. Not only had the white and more privileged learners stopped attending because of their own busy lives and other commitments, but violence and illness in the home lives of a few of the participants in Khayelitsha forced them to drop out as well.

As some of these changes were happening, the Soft Cover Project became more and more a political project. We came to the debates and the workshops with an eye to critical thinking. As the young people shaped the agenda more we found ourselves facilitating video projects, for example, that challenged perceptions of race and AIDS in private and public schools, or helping the Atlantis group do teach-in writing and drawing workshops with younger learners in their secondary school. It became clear to the group that for every educational project that might be able to give strength, knowledge and power there must also be real challenges to the larger systems of oppression and injustice that surrounded them. Throughout it all, we had an excitement that what we were doing could really be part of an agenda for social change, not only around HIV and AIDS, but also more broadly in the communities in which these young people lived.

Method: Looking back over time with three participants

Looking at educational projects using visual methodologies over time has a great deal to offer in terms of situating the broader life stories of individuals into the social, historical and political frames of which they are part. In the realm of visual and educational research, there is a growing body of work that seeks to investigate aspects of memory and social change in education (Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Weber & Mitchell, 2004; Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pithouse & Allnutt, 2011; Cole & McIntrye, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). Still, much of this work uses memory as a methodological tool, rather than tracing relationships between educational research and participants longitudinally. At Leeds University, Professor Neale leads an exciting longitudinal research project, "Timescapes" which uses qualitative and visual approaches to explore "how personal and family relationships develop and change over time" (Neale, 2010:4). As Neale explains,

> there is a concern with how the life chances of young people are forged, enabled or constrained over time, both biographically – in terms of personal and relational factors, and historically - through wider structural processes, including shifting socio-economic and policy environments, and the structures of gender, generation, and locality (Neale, 2010:4).

The connection between biography and structural process has been critical to thinking through how the Soft Cover group have changed and grown. Mapping the trajectory and histories of the project participants is part of a larger project to look at how these structural elements have

affected their lives, as well as how participants themselves view the impact of this kind of work, given that "as we live in the ever-shifting present, we continually reinterpret the past, overwrite our biographies, and reframe our orientations to the future" (Neale, 2010:5).

In 2011 some of the core group got together over two different reunion events in Cape Town, the second of which included a conference presentation where former participants reflected on their experiences on an academic panel. I took the opportunity to do a series of open-ended, one-on-one interviews with three particularly active participants nearly ten years after the start of the project – Tebogo, Abigail and Christopher – asking the question "What, if anything, have you retained from the Soft Cover Project in your life now?" [4] The themes discussed below emerged from their reflections during the interviews. The central aspects they discussed can be categorized into three themes: direction and pursuit of life goals, self-actualization, agency and identity formation, and friendship and social belonging.

Findings
Abigail: The pursuit of life goals
The connection between aspirations, life goals and the impact of visual methods and educational research projects is certainly not easy to untangle. Yet as these young people discuss their current life pursuits, they make connections to lessons and understandings of themselves and the world around them that emerged in those early workshops. Abigail was 26 when we did the following interview in December, 2011. She is now a government social worker, currently working in her hometown of Atlantis, a coloured township 40 km outside Cape Town. Abigail reflected on how the educational experiences in Soft Cover that began for her as a teenager, shaped her career choices later in life. Feeling defeated after secondary school, working as a cashier, her options felt like they were running out. Miserable, she quit her job and started to look for a path out of her situation. She explains:

> *I started to really research what it is that happens in social work, what job a social worker does and what other fields they go into. And I started to see a big co-relation* [sic] *between that and what we were busy doing* [with Soft Cover] *and I figured, ok, I really liked what we were busy doing, that made me feel* free … *I didn't feel so claustrophobic and so tied up, because my personality is one where I don't like to feel tied up. And so I decided I would go and study.* [Her emphasis]

Abigail looks back on her own life now as a series of almost fated encounters, and she sees the Soft Cover Project as a key aspect of how her aspirations developed. She admits that

> *being a part of the project changed my life dramatically. In a way that I would never have planned. So, maybe it was my destiny to be part of the project. When I look at the short* [film] *clip that we did, it's really a self-fulfilling prophecy. I mean, back then I didn't know what social work was, I didn't know it was something I would enjoy going into, or, you know, helping people or helping the community.*

The clip she refers to is part of a short film "*Fire & Hope*" I made with the group in 2004 in which they talk about their experiences as peer educators around HIV and AIDS. In that clip, seven years earlier, Abigail had said,

> *I've realized I can't change the past but I can change the future and I can help other people change their mindsets, and I think I've done that in some way. You know, just talking to people about these things, AIDS, and stuff like that, it makes a difference. Even if you can convince just one person, 'it's out there, watch out' then that is enough for me.*

As much as she is surprised at 26 years old about where she has ended up, she also speaks

about how she stayed true to her own early aspirations,

> *When I look back ... I was about 16, just when we started the Soft Cover Project ... I wrote down ten goals in my life that I wanted to achieve. There are two left on the list. I still have the list. And I have achieved eight of those goals. So to me it is a big thing. It shows me that I have within myself the potential to do that.*

The Timescales Project had similar findings around the projections young people had made into their futures, which "hint at some realistic correlations between the forging of young people's future aspirations, and their socio-economic backgrounds and circumstances, while allowing also for the role of human agency in confounding such correlations" (Neale, 2010:4). For Abigail, the idea that it is people's experience as experts in their lives as a basis for social change is something she carries with her everyday as a social worker.

> *There is never a day when I meet a client and I have this attitude of 'I know it all, I know all the answers, I know what we are going to do.' I always have this notion of 'I know that you know what you want in life so let's speak about that, let's try to explore that and see how to make that a reality. That's what I want for you.' That's what I tell all my clients, as well. 'I don't go home with you, I leave.' I don't know what it's like to live with a husband who beats you every day. I don't know what it's like to come to bed hungry. I don't know what it's like to not have money in my pockets, even though I do come from it, I can't say I could walk the walk ... I always have in the back of my mind that, were I not a part of the Soft Cover Project I would never been able to have done this. So I owe it to myself because I know I should do better now. Especially in my way of treating people. When it comes to policies, structuring, developing, those kinds of things, keeping in mind, people, their circumstances, themselves ... it is so important. That is really the essence, because from the project that is really what I got. I, as an individual, developed myself in the project. Not vice versa.*

Christopher/Eva: Self-actualization, agency and identity formation

Like Abigail, Christopher also speaks about his self-development. He was 26 when I interviewed him in December 2011, working for his father as a car mechanic, finishing his biochemistry degree by correspondence, and performing as his cross-dressing alter ego, "Eva". Eva has been competing successfully in a number of local gay beauty pageants, as well as doing work at cabarets and lip-synching events in Cape Town. After a very rocky patch in his early twenties in which he lost a number of family members to violence in Atlantis, Christopher reconnected to his activist side, and chose to conduct the interview we did in 2011 in drag as Eva.

At 17, Christopher was not publically 'out', but during the video interviews we did in 2004 he discussed what sexuality meant for him, and the need for a safe space.

> *I think one of the biggest challenges is this whole thing about sexuality, who you are? When am I ready for sex? Should I do it? Shouldn't I? They've thrown, like, the whole subject of sex in our face and now we have to deal with it. And in between that we still have to find out who we are too, so, it's like, kind of complicated. It just complicates life!*

As the years went by, the confidence around his ability to express himself, his sense of agency, and his desire to be politically active, allowed him to develop his identity as Eva. In our interview in 2011, he explains the link for him between his identity in drag and the creative work we did in the Soft Cover Project that allowed him to find his own way of self-expression and activism.

I think coming out in drag and being out in drag, is really a tool for expressing myself, and in that way, also showing that it's okay to be yourself and to express yourself in a way that might not be a social norm … where Soft Cover fits into that is that I came to understand that process led to [this expression]. *I can see it as a platform, because of the way that we took things, …* [like] *the writing about everyday life experience. The Soft Cover Project showed that we can,* [and that] *it actually means something to some other people. The stories we wrote, other people could relate to. I think that is the biggest thing that I take from the Soft Cover Project is coming to feel comfortable with working with different mediums, and not just thinking that standing on a pedestal and saying a speech is the sum total of activism or doing your bit...there is a whole creative process. I am not a painter or poet, but* [drag] *is my creative outlet.*

Christopher understands the visual and creative aspects explored during the project as helping him actualize his own identity and value his own experience, leading him to help other people do the same.

Tebogo: Friendship and belonging

For Tebogo it was the sense of belonging and the strengths of the personal relationships that stuck with him over the years. Tebogo was 34 when I conducted the interview in August 2011. He was still living in Khayelitsha, but now working as a successful IT specialist. At the beginning of the Soft Cover Project he had been one of the paid co-facilitators, but over time became as much a participant as a facilitator. He says:

I got to learn quite a lot of things, and one of the lessons that came out is that … sometimes we just have to do things because it is the right thing to do. Whether what happens to the future of what we did, time will tell us, and as things stand now, it turns out to be an awesome thing, because, here we are …That says a lot about the character of the people who we are.

This idea of 'character' and a sense of belonging to the group was an aspect present in all the interviews. Friendship, support and community were key parts of what remained from the project work. It was also clear that these elements developed over time, and were only possible through the long-term dedication from the project participants. While this was not part of our original goals for the project, it highlights the fact that personal transformation develops through connections and commitments, some of which are the direct result of trust that develops slowly. As Tebogo explains:

… I think the friendship part, I think it came a little bit later in life. Because in the beginning it was really about work. It was about work, it was about accomplishing the project and it's goals, and I didn't even know what was going to happen after the project has finished … it was a big surprise when it actually, when we moved on, and we kept in touch, and we continued talking along the years. So, one thing that stands out the most out of everything that we did, I think it is the connections that we have built, and in the ability to trust in each other in everything we did, the encouragement...I mean we differ in many different ways, but we manage, in a way, to build ourselves to become a unit, or a circle…

For Tebogo, the theme of friendship developing over time continued to emerge during his interview. He argues:

Right there at the bottom [of the Freedom Charter] *it says that "there shall be friendship" and I have never heard anyone in this country talking about friendship. It is there. It's part*

of the declaration. There should be ... There is going to be friendship. And we are talking about wealth, we are talking about peace, we are talking about democracy, we are talking about all these things, and no one is saying anything about friendship. Maybe that is the problem. We aren't building friendships. We are building yards, we are building houses, we aren't building friendships ... There must be, there should be friendships. I mean what kind of person can we be if we don't build friendships?

For Tebogo, the project offered a space in which he felt he belonged, beyond the difficulties of the world around him. He recalls:

The project came at a time where everybody was looking for something to fall back to. You know. We have had this big problem with unemployment, with HIV and AIDS, with the politics of Thabo Mbeki and his government, with high prices, with education, I mean everything was really in chaos, they still are ... so everyone was looking for somewhere to belong. So I think one of the strengths of the project was that ability, was to give us a place where we can belong.

Tebogo saw the project as tangible work, which existed beyond the realm of 'activism'. While we understood our project as part of instigating the possibility of political activism around HIV and AIDS for young people, Tegobo saw it as a way out of traditional activism:

I mean, even with the project that we did ... I think I went to it, not because it was a good project, or one of the best projects ... in a way, it was a way out for me. It was a way out. It was a good way out in a sense that it brought material benefit to me. Because at the end of it, or my involvement with it, kind of helped me to live. So in a way it was a way out, and maybe I felt a little bit good about it, when you actually get appreciated, and rewarded for the hard work that you do, rather than simply thank you.

While Abigail and Christopher both integrate activism into their everyday lives, Tebogo feels disappointed about the possibilities of activism in light of his own economic hardship, and lived experience. Tebogo is more cynical about what change we are able to make, and states quite bluntly:

I mean the reality of the matter is that I need money to live on. And activism is not going to give me this. I mean, not now. Like, here we are fighting for the future, but I'm hungry now, I'm starving now. So I kind of needed a solution to that. So I think for me, for me the change started to happen there, is like, now I'm empowered enough, I understand things and I understand, the vigour that I had to change things, that was not going to happen overnight. It was kind of defeating really when you actually see what you have been working hard for. It didn't make any difference. I mean, just a very small difference, but you would have hoped that people would have understood things the way that you do, and changed things the way you want things to change for all of us. So it's kind of defeating to see, actually, things are getting worse. So all the knowledge, all the education, the workshops, kind of went to waste. It was a drop in the ocean.

Tebogo, unlike the others, was facing harder economic conditions, and had already been involved in activist work for much longer. Tebogo's reflections in hindsight also point to "discerning how one has fared in relation to one's own innermost standards and ideals" (Freeman, 2010:35). Nonetheless, structural obstacles in young people's lives became a central part of how the project developed over time.

Many of the young people we lost along the way were consumed with the everyday realities that surrounded them, from violence, HIV infection, to difficulties based on race or class. As time went on there was a clear distinction around the limitations forced on the lear-

ners from more economically fragile homes, which were plagued with ongoing crises. Even though during the project there was little distinction between the learning, commitment and possibilities between participants in the group, by the end of secondary school none of the young people in Khayelitsha were able to continue their studies, while almost all of the young people from Atlantis were able to find some means to do so. This has meant very different life possibilities over time. Given the fact that we were working with almost no funding after the first couple of years, maintaining contact and following up where people's lives had gone was difficult. As Christopher says,

> *I think that was what made the Soft Cover Project such as success in my eyes, and that it was such a great experience because it was not just one snapshot we worked at, and it was something that developed over time. We grew as we grew. We grew together, and .... we grew together but apart at the same time, so it was all good ... I think more people could have had the opportunities that we had, and the experiences ... more attention could have been made to those who fell to the wayside.*

I agree with Christopher's criticism that finding ways to maintain contact on a more sustainable level over time is a central part of how work like this might make real impact in young people's lives, and also that it was time itself as a factor that enabled many of the positive aspects that carried through. As Tebogo also maintained, support, trust and friendship activated a space that was important for him in retrospect.

Discussion and conclusion

Certainly, one of the methodological issues of a small project such as this, which developed personal relationships between participants, project leaders, and researchers, is that the divisions between those roles becomes blurred with time. As the project progressed, those who remained invested in the Soft Cover group became part of what Tebogo called a '*unit*' or '*circle*'. I was also transformed over time in many ways as I witnessed young people subjected to violence, racism, deep poverty, poor schooling and damaged communities. The reciprocity that emerged within the project breaks down some of the hierarchy of the traditional research relationship, yet it is difficult to deal with neatly in assessing the data years later as the lines are even less distinct. Christopher is quite right when he says, "*we grew as we grew*". Indeed each of us has narratives and reflections to add to what a process like this can tell us about our goals around community participation and social transformation.

Tebogo, Abigail, and Christopher point to ways that long-term, collective learning can be part of an emancipatory project of education. Christopher and Abigail as adults find themselves working towards social change at the community level. Even while there is much criticism of a model of participation that focuses on the individual and not the broader structural processes necessary to make lasting social change, I would argue that the dichotomy between the individual and the collective is often too stark. As Glyn Williams (2004: 557) points out,

> celebrations of 'individual liberation' and critiques of 'subjection to the system' both oversimplify participation's power effects. To re-politicise participation, empowerment must be re-imagined as an open-end and ongoing process of building political projects at a range of spatial scales.

It is important at the same time not to romanticize the impacts of personal change, or its broader reach. I tend to agree with Kysa Nygreen (2010), who is wary of writing too much into small-scale education projects like Soft Cover. She discusses how she resolved her dilemma of scale:

by imagining the true impact of the project was not to be found in our collective action, but in the project's 'ripple effects' as students took what they learned into other areas of their lives. Given the intensive resources that went into [the project] – time, money, energy, and otherwise – this strikes me as a rather inefficient strategy for the kind of movement building that I assume to be necessary for achieving deep structural change (Nygreen, 2010:24).

Nygreen goes on to argue that we must take the issue of scale seriously if we are committed to structural social change that goes beyond the individual. With these criticisms in mind, longitudinal approaches to visual and educational research still have great insights to give into both the actual lasting impact aimed at social change, as well as the structural processes that intersect with the lives of participants.

While the testimonies from these respondents held that the visual educational research had real and lasting impact, their life stories also attested to how the economic and social factors that surrounded them played a significant role in their development that the project alone was not able to address. Nonetheless, from our interviews and reflections over the years, there were lasting effects around a sense of confidence built from friendship and support, life direction, and personal transformation. Clearly more work needs to be done, and methodological tools developed, to understand better about how we can map social change through time and scale in educational research using visual methods, in both quantitative and qualitative ways. This study is a preliminary reflection pointing to some of the unexpected results that remain with project participants. From these reflections we can see that the length and commitment to the project, as well as the trust that develops through personal relationships, are significant factors in transformative potential, and thus should be built into project design when possible. This might mean allowing time and space to let friendships and goals develop outside the boundaries of the project's specific objectives. We can also see how using participant-led visual methods empowers young people creatively in relation to self-actualization, identity formation and pursuit of personal life goals. All of these aspects can positively contribute to social change in relation to HIV prevention and leaderships amongst South African young people. Developing further protocols to trace longitudinal impacts through the life span of participants will help us to critically assess how individual and collective social transformation happens in relation to visual methodologies.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   This research was initiated by Professor Claudia Mitchell as part of a small grant through CHIR/CIDA. As time unfolded the research took on a life of its own, forming the basis for my Master's dissertation, and subsequent research, much of which did not have formal funding.
2   I have written about the project in a number of articles and chapters: Walsh S & Mitchell C 2008. I'm too young to die: HIV, masculinity, danger and desire in urban South Africa. In A Welbourn & J Hoare (eds). *HIV and AIDS*. Oxford: Oxfam; Walsh S 2007. Power, Race and Agency: 'Facing the Truth' with Visual Methodology. In N De Lange, C Mitchell & J Stuart (eds). *Putting People in the Picture: Visual methodologies for social change*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers;

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3   Unfortunately, the first young people to drop away as early as 2003 were the white youth from Rondebosch, who claimed that their other extra-curricular school and home commitments made it too difficult to continue attending our workshops. This was one of the first indications of the ways that economic factors affected the work we did.

4   In addition, ethics in a project like this are always complicated. As the young people saw themselves as activists and not only informants, they wished to be represented in films and in writing under their real names, which was a challenge to the traditional practice of protecting identities used in academic research. For this article, given that it will circulate primarily in academic circles and not necessarily part of grassroots educational efforts, I have chosen to change participants' names.

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