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An arts-based collaborative intervention to promote medical male circumcision as a South African HIV and AIDS prevention strategy

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Abstract

This article addresses the extent to and ways in which an arts-based learning intervention can be regarded as transformative specifically with regard to the quality of student learning across the domains of academic enhancement, civic learning, personal growth, and through engaging with social advocacy. This article focuses on a collaborative project between Artist Proof Studio, a community art centre, and Sonke Gender Justice, a gender advocacy organisation, in a series of HIV prevention and advocacy interventions. The project addresses the question: "Can an advocacy campaign for Medical Male Circumcision (MMC), with its complex messaging, be effective in communicating with South African young men?" This article however, responds to the question: "How can the visual arts be used to develop a communication strategy for the promotion of MMC and what influence does this have on the students involved in the project and their uptake of MMC as an HIV prevention strategy?" The article contends that the 'visual voice' expressed by the students as 'change-agents' led to self-reflection and behaviour change with some of the student participants undergoing MMC. It also highlights the value of arts-based methods as a catalysing and empowering strategy for social communication.

Keywords: Medical Male Circumcision; Advocacy campaign; Action research; Murals; Arts-based tools.

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Introduction

This article focuses on how a collaborative project between Sonke Gender Justice (Sonke), a gender advocacy organisation and Artist Proof Studio (APS), a community art centre, that provides the visual imaging for an advocacy campaign for Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) through mural painting, posters,

comics and visual aids influenced self-reflection and uptake of MMC among participants¹. The collaborative project between these two public benefit organisations links the visual arts to public education through engaging the skills of artists, learning programmes and arts-based workshops to generate visual tools that enhance Sonke's broader advocacy campaign.

APS is a community-based printmaking centre in Newtown, Johannesburg, open to approximately 60 art students annually who receive educational subsidies through corporate and donor funding or from contracted projects. The students receive three years of training in printmaking and professional practice². The mission of APS is to provide a creative space for artists and students, skills and facilities for artistic production, and support to its students to self-actualise and enhance democratic purpose (www.artistproofstudio.org.za). APS attracts talented young people from the surrounding urban townships of Johannesburg as well as students from rural communities who do not have the economic means to further their education. The collaborative project between Sonke and APS students and artists on previous gender justice and anti-xenophobia advocacy campaigns through its One Man Can programme, casts the visual artist in the role of change agent in an HIV prevention campaign, which is arguably one of South Africa's most pressing social issues. The student body of APS is comprised of mostly male youth who understand contemporary trends and accessible messaging. APS has been tasked, through a jointly funded project with Sonke, to contribute innovative visual imagery for an advocacy campaign as part of a nationwide strategy on HIV and AIDS prevention³. The premise for this form of engagement is that if meaningful change is to be sustained to achieve full expression of human rights and freedom, community members require full participation in that freedom of expression⁴. While the project is a nation-wide campaign including the arts in bringing about public awareness, this article reports on an evaluation of the influence of the project on the students involved in designing and implementing the project, and their uptake of MMC. The first phase of the project, which involved role-plays, focus group discussions, and various interactive activities, was evaluated by Shoshana Zeldner, a visiting researcher and the second author of this paper⁵. The second phase involved the implementation of eight additional murals, community dialogues and the further refinement of visual imagery to support the MMC awareness campaign. Some of the findings have been applied in the design of the second phase of the intervention conducted in 2012-13.

Sonke Gender Justice Network, a Cape Town and Johannesburg based NGO that began in early 2006, addresses the HIV and AIDS epidemic from a gender-focused perspective. Sonke works to "strengthen government, civil society and citizen capacity to support men and boys to take action to: promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS" (www.genderjustice.org.za). The One Man Can Campaign which began as a pilot project of Sonke, is based on the understanding that each individual can play a role in fostering a more equitable and healthy society.

¹ This inquiry forms part of a National Research Foundation (NRF) supported research area at the University of Johannesburg on 'The role of art in social change', which has successfully developed an AIDS Action intervention using arts-based methods for generating awareness and activism in urban and community sites.

² The Media Advertising Print, Packaging and Paper (MAPPP) Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) accredited the Visual Art and Design printmaking training for 8 years before it closed to serving the arts and culture sector in 2011.

³ This was made possible through a grant from the South African Development Fund (SADF) and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation from 2011 to 2012.

⁴ This MMC project described in this paper draws on 15 years of HIV and AIDS advocacy and health promotion work conducted by APS involving arts-based methods in an HIV and AIDS awareness and action campaign that spreads its message through printmaking and craft, called Paper Prayers. The Paper Prayers Campaign began as a campaign in 1997 at APS to create awareness about AIDS by offering basic factual knowledge and providing emotional support for traumatized individuals and communities. The campaign team sought to make the pandemic visible through visual and creative expression (Berman & Allen, 2009).

⁵ Sections of Zeldner's report were submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Coexistence and Conflict at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management

The campaign “supports men and boys to take action to end domestic and sexual violence and to promote healthy, equitable relationships that men and women can enjoy—passionately, respectfully and fully” (www.genderjustice.org.za). The medical male circumcision (MMC) campaign is a recent component of One Man Can and was initiated in response to research findings conducted in several sub-Saharan African sites that determined that men who have been circumcised reduce their risk of contracting HIV by up to 60% (Auvert et al., 2005). Sonke mobilises men in urban and rural areas to support each other in MMC as a prevention measure. Sonke also supports the South African National AIDS Council’s call for strategic media campaigns to ensure that appropriate messages are conveyed to the public. Through this project, APS is expanding its work with Sonke on HIV prevention and gender equality educational programmes that engage young men in urban and township-based public art projects (see Image 1).

Image 1

One Man Can: Sonke Gender Justice and Artist Proof Studio students, Bree Street Taxi Rank 2007 (Courtesy of Sonke)



APS students participate in educational workshops, research, and image development as a way of engaging with the material, and producing viable campaign artwork. Artwork is collaboratively workshopped with APS students and Sonke staff and used in murals, posters, and comic strips. Verbal messaging alongside visual messaging is developed and tested throughout the campaign. Because APS students match the target audience for this campaign (primarily young urban men between the ages of 19 and 26) they are ideal contributors to the development of the visual messaging. In addition, the women’s voice and sensitive gender perspective provides an important contribution to the process.

As mentioned earlier, the question that this article addresses is: “How can the visual arts be used to develop a communication strategy for the promotion of MMC and what influence does this have on the students involved in the project and their uptake of MMC as an HIV prevention strategy?”

Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspective for this paper draws on a Freirian approach of knowledge transfer to empower participants (Freire, 2003), and is employed to support the claim that an arts-based approach can facilitate social change. Concepts such as active or transformative citizenship are part of the educational mission of APS, which positions the artist as a change agent through her or his active participation in community-

engaged projects. The context for the arts-based work is the roll out of MMC as an HIV and AIDS prevention strategy (<http://www.avert.org>).

Transformative Citizenship

Transformative citizenship in the context of this article requires the mobilisation of latent energy of people in communities in order to promote value systems that will further the common good (Berman, 2012, p. 155). Mamphela Ramphele identifies the need to re-mobilise ordinary citizens to participate actively in transformation, stating that, “People have to become agents of their own development” (Ramphele, 2008, p. 299). Moreover, she asserts that government has a responsibility to create an enabling environment for citizens to contribute to their own development and to address the deep psycho-social dissonances in our society. Ramphele posits that “[t]he question each one of us must ask every day is whether we are giving the best we can to enable our society to transcend the present and become its envisaged self” (2008, p. 311).

In a political climate of intolerance and fear, how can the arts be integrated to creatively and productively engage citizens in dreaming and participating to realise a better future? John Paul Lederach explains that art is a tool that takes us into a collective imaginative arena. It is a way to “invoke, set free, and sustain innovative responses to the roots of violence while rising above it” (2005, p. 172). APS has attempted to create an enabling environment that recognises the benefits of mutually empowering relationships. The project presented in this article engages art students as active citizens in imagining and participating in the realisation of a better future.

Artist as change agent

Activist art (art produced with a purpose or message of social action) is often related to community-based art, which exists in many different forms, from public art (murals, performance, interventions) to community art centres. The common premise is that art cannot belong to an economic or social elite: it is a communal resource whose boundaries between creators, participants and the public are often permeable. APS uses arts-based approaches to address some of the social challenges facing youth. The future of urban youth in Johannesburg, for example, is full of economic opportunity but also full of social threats: HIV prevalence rates in 2010 affect up to 20% of youth in Gauteng, and the lure of drugs and crime is part of living in poverty and unemployment (<http://www.avert.org>). South Africa faces the challenge of educating youth in the time of AIDS, crime, violence against women, and rampant materialism in an urban city and culture in which the political leaders may not be perceived by all citizens as ideal role models in the HIV and AIDS prevention campaigns. Young men may justify their practices of unsafe sex and multiple sexual partners by citing examples set by political leaders (e.g., Jacob Zuma’s polygamy and public disclosure during his rape trial of having had unprotected sex with an HIV-positive woman).

One goal of fostering the artist-as-agent is to subvert the traditional construction of masculinity to tap into the sensitivities of the artist as ‘feelers’ in society, and to address the gender bigotry so prevalent in South African culture. In a PhD study, the first author explored agency, imagination and resilience to facilitate change through the visual arts in South Africa, and contends that lessons in leadership, public engagement, social responsibility, human rights, and empowerment must be part of an artist’s education and training in order to counter the dominance of material values in the wider society, and to instil a desire to address social inequities (Berman, 2009).

Harry Boyte, Director of the Centre for Democracy and Citizenship in Minnesota, USA, talks about finding more strategies to “make our work more civic” and asserts that “we need to talk about examples of culture change and spread them” (Boyte, 2006, p. 37). South Africa’s developing democracy requires active citizens

with the capacity to disseminate values of equality, dignity, liberty and social justice. Awareness of active citizenship among South Africans can be developed through specific educational and skills interventions embedded in experiential learning programmes.

It has been argued elsewhere (Berman, 2009; 2012), that artists are able to imagine and create other realities as part of their creative practice and that they are active agents, in that they use multiple geographic and cultural references. These capacities are valuable in facilitating change in a particular community.

Promoting MMC to prevent the spread of HIV in South Africa

MMC as a preventative measure for HIV and AIDS, while initially controversial (Oluka, 2008; Tobian, Serwadda, Quinn, & Gray, 2009; USAID: www.aidstarone.com), has found increased support in public health policies. Well-recognised organisations like the World Health Organisation (WHO), UNAIDS and the Gates Foundation have recently supported MMC-related initiatives. According to the UNAIDS Factsheet on Male circumcision as an HIV prevention tool, the WHO and UNAIDS undertook a technical consultation in response to the outcomes of three studies, i.e. the South Africa Orange Farm Intervention Trial in 2005, and two U.S. National Institute of Health trials in Kenya and Uganda, respectively. Put together these three studies showed that circumcised men had between 50-60% lower levels of HIV infection than did uncircumcised men (Auvert et al., 2005; WHO/UNAIDS, 2007). A study carried out in Rakai, Uganda found that male circumcision reduces the risk of several sexually transmitted infections in both sexes, and these benefits should guide public health policies for neonatal, adolescent, and adult male circumcision programmes (Tobian et al., 2009).

In a Kenyan study exploring barriers to MMC for uncircumcised men, Herman-Roloff, Otieno, Agot, Ndinya-Achola and Bailey (2011) found that numerous factors and beliefs persuaded men to avoid being circumcised. These included religious and cultural values; pressure to avoid taking time off work; fear that MMCs will make men more promiscuous; belief that MMCs were unnecessary; and an unappealing abstinence period amongst other factors. Based on their findings Herman-Roloff et al. (2011) argue that increased involvement of religious leaders, women's groups and peer mobilisation groups could encourage more Kenyan men to have an MMC.

Significant cultural beliefs and practices are tied to circumcision that can either support MMC or not. Some South African groups historically do not practice circumcision (like the Zulus whose King has recently come out in support of MMC) while others (Xhosas) have an important coming-of-age ritual surrounding the practice. In many cases men may be compelled by social pressure to undergo circumcision in a medical or traditional cultural setting (Oluka, 2008; Huisman, 2008). Many young men who do not participate in a traditional circumcision are "labelled as cowards" and not considered to be men within their own communities (Oluka, 2008, p. 118). In the context of traditional practices in communities, there is a need to engage traditional leaders in the conversation on the practice of MMC in each community to accommodate dissenting views to promote broader implementation (Herman-Roloff et al., 2011).

According to Sawires, Dworkin, Fiamma, Peacock, Szekeres and Coates (2007), in their work on the challenges and opportunities of male circumcision, MMC rollout has been slowed down by concerns that it might lead to "risk compensation" (p. 708) which implies that the partial protection offered by MMC allows men to engage in more risky sexual behaviour. Women's rights advocates have raised fears that circumcised men might be less willing to use condoms and thus might pressure women into having unsafe and unwanted sex, and run the risk of unintended pregnancy. Additional concerns are that funding might be diverted from HIV prevention and treatment programs focused on empowering women and be shifted to support circumcision rollout. However, according to Sawires et al. (2007), the data from the male

circumcision trials provides an opportunity to address the need to improve gender equality, since it will go a long way toward resolving some of the most powerful dynamics of HIV transmission. In March 2007, the WHO and UNAIDS jointly issued a set of recommendations on male circumcision stating that “the efficacy of male circumcision in reducing female to male transmission of HIV has been proven beyond reasonable doubt” (WHO/UNAIDS, 2007, p. 2).

Project Description

The project examined in this article is a classroom intervention that involves art students from APS who develop imagery in response to HIV and gender advocacy workshops conducted by Sonke. Selected images are then adapted with appropriate messaging, managed by Sonke, that were applied in a public campaign through murals and posters.

The collaboration between Sonke and APS on the MMC initiative began in March 2011 when APS students attended two three-day workshops led by Sonke that focused on HIV prevention strategies and sexual health. Phase One of the workshops involved role-plays, discussions, focus groups, and various interactive activities. At this time, students were introduced to the concepts and material that they would use to develop visual messaging. During the second workshop students were asked to engage in small groups with some of the concepts learned by developing messaging and images. For twelve weeks these small groups, led by APS facilitator Shannin Antonopoulo and her team, convened bi-weekly, designing and developing artwork for the campaign that communicated the value of MMC. Students acquired skills and tools including brainstorming, carrying out informal interview processes, mind mapping, visual mapping and design, doing visual research, using photovoice and document reviews, and then learned how to apply them. Students had to leave the classroom and work in the streets and with the communities around them to find the information they needed to conceptualise relevant images.

The APS students were divided into three groups and a series of workshops involving them, APS and Sonke staff resulted in the development of a series of images suitable for posters, murals, and comic strips promoting MMC. The first evaluation of the students’ imagery took place in July 2011 involving all the partners including Sonke, APS staff and donor representatives from the South Africa Development Fund. This forum selected the five most effective images they thought suitable to incorporate into the broader advocacy campaign (see Images 2 and 3). The images chosen were evaluated using the following criteria: provocative; graphically striking; and clear in their visual and textual messaging.

Image 2

APS MMC workshop and presentation with Shannin Antonopoulo and students 2011 (Image courtesy of APS)

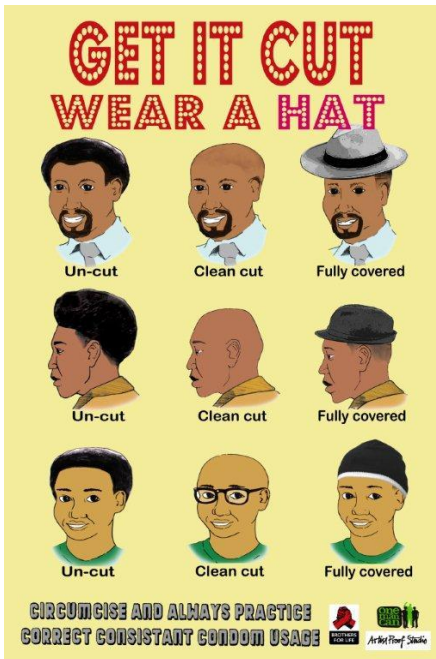


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Image 3

Poster developed by APS students for the MMC Campaign 2011



Further workshops and focus groups were held to brainstorm and reflect on the verbal messaging alongside visual messaging. Sonke and APS incorporated messages with the posters and designs for murals such as “Get it Cut—Wear a Hat”, “Less Skin—We Win”; then presented the images to different community forums. A series of questions attached to each poster tested responses to the effectiveness of the images in relationship to the messages. Sonke staff compiled and discussed this data in relation to their advocacy campaign in order to determine the need for clear and consistent messaging. Sonke subsequently approved only two of the five designs that they felt were suitable to transfer as public murals to promote the MMC campaign in Gauteng and Western Cape. The first mural, “Get it Cut—Wear a Hat”, was completed in August 2011 in Bram Fischerville, Soweto. Two mobile murals carrying the same message were erected in two clinics in Zola and Chiawelo in Soweto in September 2011 (see Images 4 and 5).

Image 4

APS Students in front of a wall at Zola Clinic Soweto for the MMC campaign “Get it Cut—Wear a Hat”, 2011 (Image courtesy of L Adleman)



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Image 5

Mural outside Chiawelo Clinic, 2011 (Image courtesy of APS)



The fundamental approach for APS is to involve students on a deep level through their responses to the campaign slogans with original metaphors and complex messaging, for example “Get it Cut—Wear a Hat” that generated dialogue and debate. Sonke’s objective is to promote clear, unambiguous, consistent and refined public images. While branding of the advocacy campaign is necessary, this objective in some cases diverges from the focus of the educational mission of APS that students engage with innovative imagery that sometimes promotes ambiguity and provokes dialogue. This position is supported by communication researchers who claim, “the best messages allow listeners to feel like they were not given a complete solution to a problem” (Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 238).

The final image selected by Sonke with the slogan “Reducing Risk Together” has evolved into a coherent graphic design that is suitable for taxi wraps, T-shirts, posters and consistent branding of the campaign (see Images 6 and 7).

Image 6

APS students painting the mural for the Sonke MMC Campaign, 2012 (Image courtesy of APS)



Image 7

T-shirt design by Sonke and APS



Phase Two of the collaborative project (for 2012) plans to include eight additional murals linked to the community sites determined by Sonke. The process of painting each mural is aimed at engaging youth groups and community dialogues in a collective process with Sonke staff and APS art students.

The Evaluation

For her internship with APS, Shoshana Zeldner (the second author of this article) evaluated the impact of Phase One of the APS and Sonke collaborative project. Supervised by Kim Berman (the first author of this article), the evaluation used an Action Research approach since it is an emerging and encompassing methodology and includes multi-modal approaches to monitor the effectiveness of the project (see Zeldner, 2011). In her fieldwork, Zeldner analysed the visual methods from the APS workshops (e.g., photovoice, collage, visual mapping and drawing). The evaluation focused on how these approaches worked to ensure participants' movement from awareness to action in terms of their views on and uptake of MMC. It used an evaluative lens to analyse the ways in which the artistic process sought to influence participants, the strengths and challenges of the campaign, and strategies that can be employed to increase the reach of the initiative.

The evaluation was located within the Most Significant Change (MSC) framework. According to Davies and Dart (2005), MSC is particularly valid in the context of participatory programmes. It does not use pre-determined indicators but uses a story approach of what, when and how (Davies & Dart, 2005). MSC is an emerging technique that requires among other steps a process of collecting stories of change, reviewing the stories within the organisational hierarchy, and providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process. They recommend that participants look for significant changes in four domains or broad categories of possible Significant Change stories. These include changes in the quality of people's lives; changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities; changes in the sustainability of people's organisations and activities; and any other changes (Davies & Dart, 2005).

The domains of change can be adapted to each inquiry. Examples of MSC questions include:

- How have you been involved in the project?
- What are the important changes that have resulted from this project for you?

What are the important changes that have occurred in the community as a result of this project and what problems were there? (Davies & Dart, 2005, pp. 25-26)

In this case, the questions were adapted to include changes in individuals with regard to the role of art as a catalyst for transformation; community engagement; social activism; empowerment; and skills development. These four areas became the intended targets to monitor change in the evaluation.

In the interview the following questions were therefore asked of the APS participants:

- From your point of view, describe the most significant change that has resulted from your involvement with this project.
- Why is this significant to you?
- Did the artistic process facilitate any of the learning and/or changes that you have experienced and how?
- How do you think this training will influence your future lifestyle choices? How has it already?
- How has this training shifted your understanding of MMC?
- What do you think was the most significant portion of this training? (Zeldner, 2011, p. 12).

Data collection involved the use of the MSC technique to conduct a baseline study, midterm interviews, and to collect stories from students, staff and partner organisations that addressed the research questions. Stories of change were collected through interviews with participating students at three different times (June, September, and October 2011) as a way of examining how students' understanding of the campaign developed over time, and how different parts of the campaign influenced their thinking about MMC. While the campaign began in February 2011, the first round of interviews was conducted in mid-project in June 2011 with approximately 30 students (1st to 3rd year). Students at APS were on site at the studio each week, and spent between 20 and 60 minutes being interviewed. Students brought artwork to each interview and while there was a pre-determined set of questions, the artwork guided discussion about the artistic process and the related transformations they may have experienced as a result of the initiative. The semi-structured interview process and the inclusion of artwork allowed the researcher to develop trust and rapport with the students through a more informal yet organic conversation. This helped to overcome one of the limitations of the evaluator's role as a white, American female (Zeldner, 2011). During mid-June, APS students and interns participated in a focus group discussion which provided an understanding as to how they collectively worked through the imaging processes. The authors also participated in artwork critiques with the students and other staff meetings pertaining to the visual campaign. In August 2011, organisational and educational changes took place that reassigned the majority of the students to other projects and left only ten 3rd year or senior students working on the visual MMC campaign. During this time the remaining ten students were interviewed as a way of tracking the project changes. The final interview phase of the initiative occurred in October, when the mural team was interviewed for a final time at the site of the first mural in Soweto (Zeldner, 2011).

The interviews with the students were recorded, transcribed, reflected upon and analysed. Common themes were identified from the interviews and documents, which included reports, workshop agendas, educational material disseminated to participants, and artwork created during the project (Zeldner, 2011).

The influence of an arts-based intervention on the uptake of MMC among students

The narratives generated by the students during the MSC technique and interviews were analysed. The domains of change focused on the artistic process as a catalyst for transformation; collective process, relational transformation, and community engagement; commitment to social activism; and empowerment, critical thinking and skills development.

Artistic process as a catalyst for transformation

Based on responses of approximately 50 interviews conducted during the evaluation process, it became apparent that significant individual transformational change happened as a result of these initiatives. The artistic process presented programme participants with a creative space that ultimately encouraged, facilitated, or allowed for meaningful change. Some of the reasons for this level of change stem from the space that the individual artistic process presents. It offers participants a means to explore issues presented on a highly personal level by developing a connection to the material at hand (Zeldner, 2011).

The majority of the 30 students interviewed in June/July acknowledged the importance of the artistic process in enhancing their learning of the material and in many cases as a driving force for change in their views on and uptake of MMC. Most students understood that the image-making process required them to think about information in a more complex and engaged way, which then resulted in a deeper level of learning. In order to share information about MMC with others, several students acknowledged that it must be completely understood on an individual level, and art offered an appropriate arena for this personal learning. As one student expressed, *“for me, working with images makes learning much more exciting and interesting”* (Zeldner, 2011, p. 25). One student explained that the artistic process allowed him to think through challenging concepts and themes in order to develop an idea that someone else could easily understand (Zeldner, 2011). For many of these students, art is a field they respect and love and that, as well as a demonstration of artistic skill or talent is the basic premise on which they are admitted to APS. Each art student is provided with subsidised training in which the learning programme is designed to engage them in larger social concerns while concurrently reinforcing their own personal discoveries and knowledge in the process.

While students understood the importance of this process, many of them expressed frustrations as they struggled to develop appropriate and well-received visual images for the circumcision campaign. They discovered that researching and consolidating ideas into a coherent outcome was not an easy task. This challenge can be viewed as something that speaks to how difficult it is to change human behaviour. Many students acknowledged that the art-making helped them understand the universality of the HIV and AIDS crisis and their need to become active participants in the prevention of the spread of the disease (Zeldner, 2011).

According to a 26-year-old male student at APS, in response to the question on the role of the artistic processes in facilitating learning, *“Images help us to realise there are people who behave riskily. For [us], images remind you about how to behave”* (Zeldner 2011, p.24). The visual campaign significantly increased student interest in the subject of MMC and encouraged many students to become advocates for the health practices that they learnt in the Sonke workshops. Several students explained that because of the artistic component, they felt encouraged to undergo an MMC. Others reported that the process has inspired them to be faithful to their partners; to use protection; to communicate openly with partners; and to get tested. Many students articulated a newfound realisation that they are not *“immune to HIV/AIDS”* (Zeldner 2011, p.24).

Two of the students who decided to have MMCs as a result of this project attributed this decision solely to the knowledge gained in the Sonke workshop and did not link it to their image-making process. However, due to the participatory and multi-modal design in which the art-making process is so intimately involved, the Sonke workshops cannot be seen as a stand-alone process in this case. One of the interns on the project described his most significant change (MSC) from this project as a real transformation of self, in terms of how he was able to engage with students and staff, how he developed a true sense of self, increased confidence, and enhanced leadership skills. Another student explained that his MSC was not only his choice to undergo circumcision but also encouraging four of his friends to do the same. In total, three students out of the 30 interviewed underwent MMC during the four months of involvement in the project (Zeldner, 2011).

Collective process, relational transformation, and community engagement

While much of the artistic process takes place alone, the presence of the community (whether it be classroom or cohort) plays a significant role in supporting newfound realisations and confidence that emerge from the creative exploration. APS students gained strong interpersonal skills and necessary life experience working in teams (Zeldner, 2011). According to a 23-year-old male student in response to his community engagement experience, *“Working with people has changed me a lot; now I know how to work with people, tolerate them, understand their talents”* (Zeldner, 2011, p. 26).

One of the students from the mural team experienced personal change in a way that was apparent to the researchers, APS staff, and fellow students. This third-year APS student began the project as a noticeably quiet, shy and timid 24-year-old. In his first interview, he barely elaborated on any of the questions beyond a short phrase. During the mural painting in Soweto this student was able to take ownership of the process as his artwork was chosen for one of the murals. He later explained to the researcher that having the opportunity to engage with community members affirmed the work he and the team were doing, and helped him realise how important and needed his role is as an advocate. The interview following the execution of the mural was a completely different experience from the first, in that he articulated his ideas in full sentences, looked the researcher in the eye, joked with her, and presented a newfound confidence (Zeldner, 2011).

Another student from the mural team explained that seeing his artwork in a public space was very encouraging. He explained that the images he created made him aware of his own responsibility to change behaviour with regard to sexual health and communication: *“I understand that I have a responsibility to change the way I act”* (Zeldner, 2011, p. 25). For these young artists, having their artwork displayed in a public setting that engaged the local community is empowering and ultimately strengthens and supports their newly gained knowledge of HIV and AIDS, gender advocacy and MMC.

Commitment to social activism

A core objective of APS student participation in this project is to encourage the development of a social consciousness and to use art as a means to advocate for positive social change. In response to the question on how personal change can be extended to others, a 22-year-old APS student asserts that *“the project has influenced my choices in a positive way; living positively results in a good society.... Youth have the power to influence change in people”* (Zeldner 2011, p. 23).

Through the initial 30 interviews in June/July, most students expressed their desire to work as self-employed, successful artists earning generous incomes (Zeldner, 2011). In a country in which unemployment rates are around 40-50% it is not surprising that youth have a focus on financial gain (Roos, 2011). After three sets of interviews, most students affirmed their new role as advocates for sexual health,

MMC, and positive gender roles. They are further able to openly speak to friends and family about ways in which they can make healthier life choices (Zeldner, 2011). The aspiration for financial independence is a consistent motivation for young artists at APS to achieve excellence in their careers as printmakers. However, classroom interventions, such as the MMC project, that promote community engagement and social advocacy, position APS graduates as change agents.

Empowerment, critical thinking and skills development

Many participants from the project commented that they learned how to think critically, examine facts from a variety of angles, and make their own, informed decisions (Zeldner, 2011). The artistic process encourages questioning and exploration as a way to produce artwork and this ultimately supports the same interrogation in other aspects of one's life. One of the students who developed the script and storyline for the comic explained that through that process, *"I had to change the way I thought ... I began to think about all sides of the issue and became quite critical"*. Another observed that *"the text is in your face so you have to listen"* (Zeldner, 2011, p. 24).

Other students expressed a sense of urgency to share the information with those around them and felt that the visual artistic process allowed this important information to be communicated. Most of the students explained that they gained necessary life skills including how to co-operate and collaborate in teams, to work with important, and that they improved their visual and verbal communication skills. The research aspect of the process allowed for deepened learning opportunities and some students reported the research and the conducting of interviews to have been the most significant part of the project. Approximately half the students reported artistic growth and development as a result of the process (Zeldner, 2011).

Implications

The findings of the APS/Sonke project in Phase One confirmed that it is necessary to have a well defined strategy while allowing for flexibility and change. The objectives of this project focussed on process and tangible outcomes such as the key deliverables in terms of murals and visual aids. However, the findings revealed that it is necessary to incorporate outcomes that reflect not only enhanced agency of individual students but their ability to engage with the community. Additionally, future projects could include an outcome that engages with the evaluation of change through artistic processes with members from surrounding communities. Provided that art-making is thoughtful and intentional and linked to purposeful messaging, it can foster growth and transformation through participation and ownership of the processes. The aim of Phase Two is for the artists to engage more actively in the community dialogues to ensure greater participation and ownership.

It became evident that tracking change through the artistic process takes time. The longer the students engaged with the material and the project, the more they came to really embody the lessons in their own actions, ideologies and life choices. There was a clear change from the first interview to the second and third, and it became evident that participants had the opportunity to reflect on the material presented, engage with it individually and include it into their daily lives. As a participant put it, *"[T]he training teaches us personal hygiene and how to live positively"* (Zeldner 2011, p. 23). The challenge remains to continue with workshops and focus groups in Phase Two that deepen and embed the values and personal activism in the campaign⁶.

⁶ During Phase Two in August, 2012, a class of 17 senior male APS students was given a short questionnaire and asked if they considered MMC an important life strategy and if they would consider undergoing MMC. 100% answered affirmatively (APS/Sonke workshop questions August 16, 2012).

The findings reveal that art holds the potential to engage and transform communities in a larger sense, which is part of the goal of the collaborative project to promote MMC. In order to effect large-scale change, projects must broaden their reach by adopting a scaled up approach which requires expanding networks, engaging with key leaders, and integrating the campaign into culturally appropriate parts of South African life. Establishing a strong, relevant and strategic programmatic vision is essential for maximising resulting transformation.

The partnership of an HIV/Advocacy organisation and an arts organisation is an innovative concept for South Africa as far as we are aware. The challenge is to find common ground, clear understanding of roles, responsibilities, and consistent reliable communication that supports the mission of the campaign. However, since this is a complex and culturally sensitive campaign it is not always possible to have mutual agreement on imaging the campaign messages and objectives.

The monitoring and evaluation process through conducting interviews with APS and Sonke staff reflected frustration and a lack of alignment. The objectives of APS towards Phase Two of the project differed significantly from that of Sonke. Community dialogues scheduled for sites around the country should include a team of senior artists to ensure that visual messaging includes local language, local and culturally specific messaging and imagery. Involving traditional leaders, healers, women and trained artist facilitators in the community dialogues for youth conducted by Sonke counselors would necessitate imagery that is more complex than the current campaign design (see Image 5). While the messaging can remain consistent, it is very important to have it translated into the local verbal and visual languages to be locally relevant and intelligible.

Conclusion

The findings present a powerful argument that the intervention by Sonke resulted, according to the students interviewed, in significant change in how they view MMC. Most expressed a deeper understanding that will affect their own sexual practices while others felt strongly enough to become active in the advocacy campaign. Moreover, three students during the time of the interviews in 2011 actually underwent MMC⁷. All the students who participated in community engagement through mural painting experienced increased confidence, were excited by the response to their collective image and they experienced a sense of ownership of the material and process. Empowerment by each student was arrived at through the students' ability to incorporate relevant and urgent social issues into a visual language that was required to communicate complex messaging.

Boyte (2006) urges that the challenge for building transformational change is for people to become "co-creators of our democracy, not simply its spectators and consumers.... Turning the tide on today's toxic culture requires building confidence, spreading organizing skills, and providing language and examples of civic identity and practice" (p. 32). Through their involvement in the MMC campaign, the students gain a larger sense of purpose beyond individual material acquisition, and realise that they can put their energy and talent to use in ways that benefit not only themselves, but the broader society as well.

This collaborative programme is potentially transformative at a number of levels. Firstly, it provokes a shift in some of the individual participants' values and life purposes. Secondly, the art students also develop a sense of collective purpose that is re-inforced by collective work in which they plan and intervene together to harness the power of public communication. Thirdly, APS itself is an effective facilitator to partner with Sonke which further builds the power of the campaign. The networks of change-agents create the

⁷ In a subsequent questionnaire administered in the second phase, at least three more students indicated they had undergone MMC and most others indicated that they intend to (APS/Sonke workshop questions August 16, 2012.)

possibility for an ever-growing wave. While MMC is the point that gets people talking, the bigger point is taking control of one's own life and having a deeper sense of purpose. This collaborative intervention between Artist Proof Studio and Sonke Gender Justice facilitates the expression of participatory voices, which enables both personal and collective transformation.

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