

Creative practice research in the form of environmental documentary filmmaking by South African students: A pedagogical perspective on the affective aspects of communicating climate stories

Julia Cain
University of Cape Town
julia.cain@uct.ac.za

Keywords: Creative practice research; environmental documentary; eco-pedagogy; South Africa.

The Film Theory & Practice honours programme at the Centre for Film & Media Studies at the University of Cape Town provides an opportunity for students to pursue creative practice-based research to produce a 24-30-minute documentary film in small groups as an alternative to a written dissertation. In the last 6 years, a significant proportion of the films produced in this programme can be characterised as environmental films, indicating a high level of interest and concern with environmental issues by this diverse student cohort.

This research draws on retrospective interviews with 12 of the graduates that produced these environmental films. It is also founded on working knowledge of the pedagogical approaches used within this creative practice research course.

This paper argues the following:

- the focus on environmental topics has been driven by students;
- solutions-based and forward-looking approaches are generally incorporated by this cohort;
- the practice-based research these young researchers undertake is often transformative in terms of how it affects their fundamental beliefs and behaviours, specifically in relation to environmental issues;
- the production of environmental communication (in this case documentary films) often has impacts on students' future work in public spheres, including work, activism and networking.

This case study suggests the potential of practice-based creative research to achieve powerful affective and long-term impacts on students. It explores how students experience these affects and how these types of pedagogies can offer tools to counter eco-anxiety by developing climate literacy through creative engagement. It further contributes to bigger pedagogical contestations around teaching and learning and provides a practical example of a decolonial approach from a university in Africa.

References

- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). *Generating, Deepening, and Documenting Learning: The Power of Critical Reflection in Applied Learning*. <https://hdl.handle.net/1805/4579>
- Fataar, A. (2018). Decolonising Education in South Africa: Perspectives and Debates. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 7, VI–IX.
- Fitzgerald, A., & Lowe, M. (2020). Acknowledging Documentary Filmmaking as not Only an Output but a Research Process: A Case for Quality Research Practice. *International*

Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19, 1609406920957462.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920957462>

- Hung, R. (2017). Towards Ecopedagogy: An Education Embracing Ecophilia. *Educational Studies in Japan*, 11, 43–56.
- Kessi, S. (2017). Community social psychologies for decoloniality: An African perspective on epistemic justice in higher education. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 47(4), 506–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246317737917>
- Mano, W., & Milton, Viola. (2021). Afrokology of media and communication studies: Theorising from the margins. In *Routledge Handbook of African Media and Communication Studies*. Routledge.
- Mistry, Sakota, J., Tanja. (2017). Filmmaking as research: Pedagogy and practice. *Journal of African Cinemas*, 9(2–3), 113–118.
- Skains, R. L. (2018). Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology. *Media Practice and Education*, 19(1), 82–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175>
- Waghid, Y., & Smeyers, P. (2012). Reconsidering Ubuntu: On the educational potential of a particular ethic of care. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(sup2), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00792.x>