

Participatory video as protest methodology: Student activists advocate for (social) sustainability in South African universities

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

In this paper, we unpack the motifs of two participatory videos created by 12 student activists at the University of the Free State, who were co-researchers in the 'Universities as Sustainable Communities' project (2021-2023). Whilst one video highlights the importance of activism and collective action for transforming universities into sustainable communities, the other underscores the role of togetherness and unity in working towards (social) sustainability. Both videos demonstrate the possibilities and limitations for participatory research to enhance students' agency freedom in new ways. Importantly, the motifs of the videos encourage a shift away from prevalent Eurocentric and technocratic discourses that have set the agenda for sustainability in higher education. Instead, they inspire us to pay more attention to the principles espoused in the African moral philosophy of Ubuntu and the African political philosophy of Ujamaa, encouraging an Afrocentric articulation of sustainability in higher education.

Full paper

Over a 16 month period starting in December 2021 and concluding in April 2023, we collaborated with 12 activists from different student organisations at the University of the Free State, merging our praxis as researchers and their activism as proactive students advocating for a more just and sustainable institution. As a whole, our research team comprised of 16 people: four facilitators and twelve student activists (or co-researchers). There was diversity in terms of geographic origin, with people from Eswatini, Nigeria, South Africa, Spain, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe; and gender representation was equal. We situate our research under a participatory paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997) to reshape the research positionalities between researchers and participants, aiming to foster both agency freedom (Sen, 1985) and epistemic freedoms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). That is, supporting students' agency to mobilise their locally-valued knowledge through protest, and act as critical epistemic agents within the university space.

Our project had three sets of research questions. The first set of 'internal' or conceptual research questions were aimed at stimulating our collective imagination around co-creating and co-promoting our university as a sustainable educational community, drawing from the ontologies and lifestyles

valued by young people who see themselves as black/African student activists. These research questions therefore delved into the values, beliefs, and perspectives of these activists regarding what constitutes sustainability in educational spaces and what it would take for universities to be sustainable communities. For example, during the workshops we had various activities (reflective writing, group discussion, debates) to unpack how they understood and experienced the notions of community, transformation, decolonization, and sustainability at university, but also what it meant to be black/African and what holding this identity can bring to discussions about sustainability. The second set of questions were the 'external' empirical questions, where we explored the integration of diverse knowledge systems in mapping out the practical challenges of moving from idealised conceptions of universities as sustainable communities, to the action that needs to be taken to achieve this aspiration. While the third set of questions, our 'methodological' questions considered how decolonial thinking and participatory research can work together to enhance students' abilities to promote sustainable development at the university. Furthermore, the study intended to identify limitations, challenges, and lessons learned during the research process. Altogether, the research questions considered the range of valued human capabilities necessary for building universities as sustainable communities (see Martinez-Vargas et al. 2023).

To address the external empirical questions, we produced eleven individual stories (through digital storytelling) and two collective narratives (produced through participatory videos). Digital storytelling was used to understand how the students came to be activists in the first place, and why despite advocating for different causes that align with various social movements in South Africa, they found some common ground at university. We then aimed to build on this common ground, by having the students work in groups to produce the participatory videos to capture action that can be taken to achieve the aspiration for universities to be more sustainable. The student activists produced two participatory videos that feature interviews the student activists conducted with various people at the University of the Free State, and both videos were filmed on site. The student activists selected and interviewed participants, and they filmed and edited the videos themselves, essentially producing short documentaries. The first video highlights the importance of activism and collective action for transforming universities into sustainable communities; whilst the second underscores the role of togetherness and unity for working towards (social) sustainability.

In this paper, we carefully unpack the motifs of these videos and explain how they both support the notion of a conceptual shift to understanding education for sustainable development through an African ethic (Kumalo, 2017). We argue that together, Ubuntu and Ujamaa could form the foundation for a kind of ethno-philosophy and ethic that is rooted in pan-Africanist ideals, but has potential resonance with articulations of sustainability in other global South contexts. That is, a system of thought that deals with the collective worldviews of diverse African people as a form of knowledge based on experience, folk wisdom and proverbs but also stories that convey visions about the future of universities. It is clear from the motifs of the participatory videos that such visions encompass the aspiration for universities not to be competitive learning spaces but rather communal learning places.

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