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Nurturing youth film literacy: Post-qualitative arts-based inquiry into critical self-awareness



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Research Project Registration:

Project Number: EDU710R

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Dates:

Received: 01 June 2023

Accepted: 18 Oct. 2023

Published: [to be released]

How to cite this article:

Smidt W, Waghid Z. Nurturing youth film literacy: Post-qualitative arts-based inquiry into critical self-awareness. *J transdiscipl res S Afr*. 2024;20(1), a1382. <https://doi.org/10.4102/t.v20i1.1382>

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Post-digital, as a timeframe set, raises specific concerns for young adults engaged in artistic and cultural activities, seeking to establish a sustainable livelihood within a semi-rural South African context. They grapple with issues such as determining their positionality within a world marked by fading boundaries between the physical and digital. To better understand the post-digital impact on experiential learning opportunities for young adults, the authors explored the specific ways and extent to which active engagement in shortfilm-making contributes to developing critical self-awareness among the participating post-school youth. An assemblage of transformative theories and concepts, rather than pre-determined methodologies, guided this inquiry that extended beyond the development of career and workplace competencies. The strengths of spaciousness and in-between boundary positions provided by the spider's thread metaphor served as a useful methodological tool. Moving beyond the limitations of traditional discourse and content analysis, multimodal discourse analysis in combination with a modified, six-category measuring instrument was used to explore (analyse) the evidence (data) created as products of active participant engagement in a shortfilm-making project, over a 10-month period in 2020. Findings revealed that, for the participants, it was by moving from physical self-centred understandings of reality to experiential creations of authentic reality (shortfilm-productions) and involving an expanded awareness of those alternative possibilities that nurtured their potential transpersonal growth.

Transdisciplinary Contribution: A synthesis of arts-based, post-qualitative and developmental phenomenographic approaches was employed to create, explore and communicate evidence in ways that present a holistic picture of alternative pathways to knowledge production.

Keywords: Post-digital; post-qualitative; developmental phenomenography; arts-based inquiry; film literacy; critical self-awareness; transpersonal growth; non-formal adult education.

Introduction

The topic of this article is part of a wider study: The use of film literacy in the development of critical self-awareness and transpersonal growth among post-school youth. Post-digital,^{1,2} as a timeframe set, is of particular concern to young adults engaged in artistic and cultural activities, seeking to establish a sustainable livelihood within a semi-rural, South African context. They are confronted with issues such as determining their positionality within a phygital^{3,4} world marked by fading boundaries between the physical and digital worlds. By living in a technologically advanced, interconnected world, our human understandings of reality are continually challenged by virtual spheres as the borders between science, technology and the arts are constantly reshaped. In light of the increasing complexity of current educational challenges and research trends, the authors suggest a transdisciplinarity approach to research. Therefore, this doctoral research in education builds on contemporary debates about the changing nature of knowledge production, learning and pedagogy in the post-digital age.

Engaging in contemporary educational research in a post-digital world, where knowledge and competencies informing this inquiry are constantly changing, made the researchers aware that established methodologies lack the flexibility, openness and unfolding connections required to maintain ongoing relevance. These understandings imply an essential researcher focus on considering alternative pathways to sustain relevance within a constantly changing contemporary world. By accepting an open methodological approach to inquire about the world, the researchers have effectively addressed the objectives and generated meaningful results, even when faced with uncertainties and evolving conditions during 2020 as a result of the pandemic. The application of different dimensions of human communication, transcending language barriers through

multimodal media, opened up the potential of sharing and collaborating with a wider audience, including the participants, academic community and the public. Furthermore, engaging in a developmental stage of capacity building that points past post-modern cultural perspectives and past formal educational modes of thinking, enabled the participating youths to better respond to challenges and contribute to their own development with the potential to achieve ongoing sustainability. As a result, the authors argue that our multimodal world, which includes technologies that affect every area of our lives, necessitates the growth of an expanding notion of literacy, one that may give us the knowledge and competencies to comprehend many ways of working and knowing.

This understanding necessitates a re-orientation to research in education, drawing from various disciplines including the arts, science and technology. Thus, an inquiry into the potential of film literacy has relevance for 21st-century educational research policy and practice given its:

'[T]ransversal, interdisciplinary and multicultural nature, ... its identity as an autonomous matter of study and its teaching, allowing the transmission of semiotic instruments and tools, adaptable to different audiences and characteristics'.⁵

To ensure global relevance, film literacy in our study encompasses different dimensions of human communication, transcending language barriers through multimodal media to identify, analyse, interpret, create and impart information in a clear and powerful expressive way. Additionally, as a boundary-crossing competence^{6,7,8} within the particular South African context of inquiry, film literacy facilitates communication and cooperation across disciplines, culturally defined boundaries and between communities of practice^{9,10} members in a non-formal, post-school context. This redefinition of the term film literacy has been inspired by the multiple definitions found in contemporary research,^{5,11,12,13} thus situating film literacy in a boundary-crossing position. The process of cultivating students' competencies in the field of film literacy raised fundamental questions about the nature of film literacy, its relevance to education and the nature of the process involved in the student's interaction with the medium. These fundamental questions enacted the metaphorical threads¹⁴ that served to progressively create the structural design of our domain of inquiry. These questions pertaining to the site of potential theory development within a non-formal education context also guided the formulation of the methodologies relevant to the study of film literacy.

Findings revealed that, for the participants, it was by moving from physical self-centred understandings of reality to experiential creations of authentic reality (shortfilm-productions) and involving an expanded awareness of those alternative possibilities that nurtured their potential transpersonal growth. In this process, film literacy competencies became part of the altered or expanded selves of both the participants and their audiences. Because of continuously changing communication modes and learning approaches – the result of ongoing technological innovation, a holistic

understanding of film literacy and its potentialities remains an evolving construct and the focus of a different article.

However, for this article, the authors explore the development of critical self-awareness among young adult participants by challenging assumptions and establishing thought patterns through active participation in a shortfilm-making initiative. The question in focus being: In what specific ways, and to what extent, does active engagement in shortfilm-making contribute to developing critical self-awareness among the participating post-school youth? We first contextualise the notion of employing a synthesis of approaches theoretically. A conceptual focus on critical self-awareness follows this. Thereafter, we communicate in detail how an open-methodological approach can open up experiential learning spaces and reflective activities. We track the participating young adults' active engagement in shortfilm-making and the development of critical self-awareness through the lens of the 'Myturn' shortfilm-making project. A summary of the implications of this inquiry concludes our conversation.

'Thinking with alternative ways of knowing'

In the context of post-digital learning and in response to the call to rethink the purpose of 21st-century education, the researchers focused their attention on the learning and transformation of young, post-school adults in a non-formal environment. Because we believe it is no longer possible to address the complexities of our fast-changing world in a singular and one-dimensional way, a multitude of exploratory threads¹⁴ has been tossed out with the hope of providing new insights into the positionality of this research within academic research practices and across disciplines. In education, ways of defining human learning and development have become as diverse and contested as the wealth of research approaches. Rethinking the purpose of education requires us to look back at existing learning theories and find aspects of relevance to inform our current research.

From a sociocultural perspective, Lev Vygotsky's¹⁵ enduring viewpoints suggest that learning encompasses more than just the acquisition of thinking skills; it also involves the development of specialised thinking abilities for various subjects. However, the question of how essential social interaction should be for human well-being remains uncertain in our constantly evolving society. Hannah Arendt responded to a different crisis in education when formulating the following viewpoint:

Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge... is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.¹⁶

Arendt problematised the purpose of education in the modern world by advocating for a holistic approach to advance the world while also advancing the development of the individual who participates in that world. For progressive educator Maxine Greene, it is crucial that '...our

transformative pedagogies must relate to both existing conditions and to something we are trying to bring into being, something that goes beyond the present situation'.¹⁷ Greene's ideas about the potential of 'informed engagements'¹⁷ with the arts as a space to reimagine social reality, together with Eliot Eisner's¹⁸ statement that there are multiple ways of knowing and that knowledge is constructed, not merely discovered, informed the arts-based approach of this inquiry.

Although he claims that art is research, Eisner, in a previous publication, argues that the outcomes of arts-related activities are limiting if not 'intentionally used to raise academic achievement'.¹⁹ Thus, the intended relevance of the arts-based component in this inquiry will be determined by its educational value to the participants. Furthermore, although the participants' shortfilm-productions are referred to as reflective activities and artistic expressions, these productions should not be misunderstood as outcomes of this inquiry, but rather as the catalyst for further research and a part of an ongoing multimodal discourse. In an attempt to extend his border pedagogy theory from a formal education context to the broader public domain, Henry Giroux describes the process whereby:

[C]itizens need to be multi-literate in ways that not only allow them access to new information and media-based technologies, but also enable them to be border-crossers capable of engaging, learning from, understanding, and being tolerant of and responsible for matters of difference and otherness.²⁰

Giroux's border-crossing theory has dual relevance when applied to the non-formal education context of this inquiry. It provided the basis for a redefinition of film literacy as a boundary-crossing competence, in response to the work of Walker and Nocon⁶ for improving learning designs for non-dominant students. Additionally, the reference to multi-literacy^{20,21} is relevant to the potentially vital role of film literacy regarding social criticism in contemporary society.^{22,23,24} By engaging in boundary-crossing conditions provided by the shortfilm-making opportunity, the post-school participants acquired much-needed knowledge and skills, aimed to enable them to effectively assess, challenge and critique societal norms, injustices and power structures through informed and articulate means. The notion of border and boundary-crossing relates to the adoption of innovative viewpoints from outside the boundaries of a community of practice, which enable individuals to move beyond the limitation of a singular worldview. Hence, the implementation of essential interaction between participants' perspectives within the 'Myturn'-community of practice and external perspectives where possible and relevant.

A conversation between Peter McLaren and Petar Jandrić introduces 'the first systemic attempt to capture McLaren's ideas about the relationships between critical revolutionary pedagogy and virtuality'²⁵, also requiring a revisit of Vygotsky's ideas about learning.¹⁵ McLaren claims that education which is aligned to the needs of the youth is 'no longer seen as a social responsibility but as picking carefully from an array of consumer choices provided by a number of

new companies and corporations'.²⁵ A further connection with the multiliteracies theory^{21,26} offers valuable insights into the benefits of a more holistic approach to ongoing learning opportunities for the young adult participants within the non-formal context of this inquiry.

According to Sophia Holloway and Patricia Gouthro, the multiliteracies theory further provides a 'critical lens for lifelong learning by consciously and explicitly engaging with cultural diversity, technology, and multimodality'.²⁶ Jandrić, in collaboration with co-authors Jeremy Knox, Tina Besley, Thomas Ryberg, Juha Suoranta and Sarah Hayes, explores the impact of the post-digital on education and emphasises the interconnectedness of 'digital technology', 'media', 'virtual', 'other' and 'natural human and social life'.¹ The authors suggest that an enduring balance should thus be maintained between existing knowledge, belonging to an old world and the creation of new learning spaces and opportunities. From these philosophies, and for purposes of the current study, it can be assumed that the fresh and original ideas of the youth, in addition to their personal qualities, should be developed and applied in collaboration with artificial intelligence, to revitalise, improve and advance, not only them but also the society.

Recent research has revealed that those pandemic pedagogies which focus on 'relationships, social and emotional learning, student and teacher well-being, authentic assessments, direct instructions and creative play are now more important than ever'.^{27,28} Considering that there are currently no clear-cut solutions to the persistent absence of such pedagogies, the authors believe that the first step towards conceptualising transformational pedagogies would be to realise that the human situation in terms of education and learning is at a turning point. The worsening education crisis engendered new opportunities to rethink the purpose of 21st-century education. With these understandings in mind, the authors developed a post-qualitative educational inquiry in a semi-rural South African setting.

'Thinking without' methodology: A post-qualitative approach

We realised that if we intended to create new ways of seeing, doing and being through this inquiry, we had to deliberately unlearn what we knew about methods-driven research. This 'unlearning' relates to refusing a repetition of what is recognisable, what is already known; it also relates to taking risks when working in a quandary and 'inventing inquiry in the doing'.²⁹ 'Thinking with' post-structural theorists like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard and, notably, Deleuze and Guattari suggest 'how thinking with post-structural (PS) theories become methods of post-qualitative inquiry (PQI)'.²⁹ Instead of a pre-determined methodology, a post-qualitative approach^{29,30,31} and transformative theories and concepts³² were explored. Notwithstanding criticisms of such 'methodological bricolage',³³ the authors of this current study contend that it is

no longer viable to address the intricacies of our world in a solitary and one-dimensional manner.

As a result, the transformative worldview is relevant for communicating local knowledge that is resourced by a range of participant understandings gained by reflecting both in action and on action. Because this inquiry still requires 'knowing, thinking, measuring, theorising, and observing',^{34,35} each action is considered an essential component of the other, intra-connected to the larger picture of continual learning.

'Thinking with' developmental phenomenography

According to St. Pierre, PQI addresses the complexity of a connection between conventional humanist qualitative methodology and the 'posts'.³⁶ In response to St. Pierre's statement,³⁶ the authors of this present study argue that because both post-qualitative and developmental phenomenographic approaches are always in-becoming, with 'no end or closure',³¹ incorporating developmental phenomenography³⁷ into a post-qualitative open-methodology was extremely relevant. Furthermore, the authors believe that this investigation has the potential to contribute to the expansion of a developmental phenomenographic approach to research in education by investigating how the findings may be implemented in various ways, in a diverse community and within a specific learning field.

In accordance with the principles of developmental phenomenography, a pilot study³⁸ was conducted to enhance the research framework, assess the feasibility of data collection instruments, explore creative methods for articulating research findings and consider evaluation strategies for reflective and reflexive practices, particularly in the context of artistic expressions. The results of this preliminary project³⁸ revealed that incorporating artistic elements into data collection and reimagining analysis harmonised effectively with the tenets of developmental phenomenography.

'Thinking with' an arts-based approach

It has been observed that some theoretically focused studies in the field of transdisciplinary integration use the terms 'problematic and unpredictable',³⁰ as well as 'incompatible'³⁹ and 'far from settled'³⁹ when referring to arts-based inquiry (ABI). Conversely, the authors of this article believe that this is because of research evidence revealing a lack of recording creative knowledge-production in a way that 'captures moments of reflection-in-action and-practice'.⁴⁰ Creative and arts-based approaches in academic research have been successfully integrated into the toolkits of researchers across several disciplines by critically considering the presentation mode of the findings in relation to the nature of the reader and viewer-audience.⁴¹ Arts-based inquiry is 'practised by academics performing human social research', a process that encompasses both 'artists and social researchers', according to Finley.⁴²

Knowles and Cole state that ABI is 'sufficiently fluid and flexible to serve ... as a methodological enhancement to other research approaches'.⁴³ Coemans and Hannes,⁴¹ on the other hand, found a dearth of methodological reflection on arts-based approaches. They call for additional artists-in-residence to report on their field experiences. Arts-based researchers believe that by using arts-based methodologies and methods that encourage creative expression, they can 'gain better access to the emotional, affective and embodied realms of life, cultivate empathy and challenge and provoke audiences to engage with complex and difficult social issues'.⁴⁴ Additionally, several arts-based educators^{43,45,46,47} believe that the creative arts are modes of inquiry and representation that provide significant perspectives for making decisions about pedagogical theory, policy and practice.

Figured worlds-theory

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain founded their notion of 'figured worlds'⁴⁸ within educational settings on several, sometimes opposing, schools of thought, including 'culturalists, constructivists and universalists, as well as in the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin'.⁴⁹ Their comprehension of 'figured worlds' comprises 'socially created, culturally formed activities'.⁴⁸ People participate in these activities to theoretically (cognitively), materially and/or procedurally construct (perform) new self-understandings (identities). It is this type of effort that drives this inquiry. The shortfilm-project is an example of 'socially produced, culturally constituted activities'.⁴⁸

The figured worlds theory is essential for this inquiry because it allows us to analyse people's 'collective imaginings'⁴⁹ and their ability to alter the physical world. According to Dängeli, the envisioning of alternate realities and identities⁵⁰ evokes transpersonal viewpoints in the sense of being attentive to the connections between oneself and others and the environment.⁵⁰

Transpersonal theory

The transpersonal vision manifests itself in various ways as transpersonal states or as merely another academic idea as an alternate way of thinking and living.⁵¹ The numerous methods for increasing awareness and consciousness are essential issues in a transpersonal theory of human development. Although education is regarded as 'one of the most significant areas of future inquiry and exploration in the transpersonal field',⁵² there has been a dearth of research on this topic. The few notable case studies are efforts to characterise transpersonal education as 'a holistic, expansive, growthful, or transformative process'.⁵³

These results, however, are limited to official postgraduate programmes. Nonetheless, the authors of this article find perspectives useful for inquiry into transpersonal growth and define transpersonal pedagogy as a distinctive approach to education theory and praxis, one that relates to multi-dimensional perspectives on reality beyond the boundaries

of the self. It is our view that film literacy competencies as an integral part of transpersonal pedagogy have the potential to provide the essential skills and mindset required by the 21st century workspace, skills and mindset necessary for success at all levels of employment and education.

Critical self-awareness

An intentional awareness of new learning opportunities, provided by a worsening education crisis^{27,28} informed this inquiry of the need for additional research into the notion of critical awareness as a self-constructed process that is impacted by sociocultural, political and organisational circumstances in people's everyday lives. In his prison notebooks, Gramsci writes that all people have the capacity to understand their world and to change it. Gramsci further asks the question:

[I]s it better to 'think', without having a critical awareness ... or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world?⁵⁴

In a study performed on social education in British Columbia, Canada, Kumar⁵⁵ argues that critical self-awareness as a fundamental element of education has the potential to act as a catalyst for individual and social transformation.

In his critique on the limitation of critical pedagogy, which views social change entirely as a transformation process of outer reality, Kumar argues that critical self-awareness is needed to critically observe and question the repetitive taken-for-granted patterns of belief, thought and action that shape our inner selves. Kumar attributes his understanding of critical self-awareness to Krishnamurti,⁵⁶ who finds significance in the understanding of the interconnectedness between inner and outer reality, and the role each individual plays in furthering the disintegration, struggle and deterioration of society. Therefore, a change in perspective brought about by critical self-awareness of one's reality is considered as significant as a critical awareness of one's outer reality, experienced in everyday life for bringing about visible transformation in the structure of society.⁵⁵

Ashwani Kumar defines critical self-awareness as the:

[A]bility to be aware of one's own self – one's actions, thoughts, and emotions – to see how one, through one's actions and thoughts, contributes to furthering the conflicts and degeneration in society.⁵⁵

When Kumar's theory about the place of critical self-awareness in social education was published, social education either mirrored society, confirming the existing systems, or, while tolerating the 'infallibility of the social system',⁵⁵ it suggested ways to deal with certain issues and concerns, rather than addressing the cause(s) of these issues. In this study, the authors find relevance in Kumar's third approach, in which social education functions as a catalyst for individual and societal transformation.

According to Kumar, if individuals are serious about making changes in their lives, they should be aware of the link

between social education, critical self-awareness and transformation. Kumar advocates for the inclusion of critical self-awareness in social education, which he describes as the teaching and learning of social reality. The issue is how social reality should be treated. According to Kumar, critical theory and pedagogy (Marx, Frankfurt School, Freire and McLaren) and critical self-awareness (Krishnamurti) are vital yet insufficient because of their full concentration on the outside world as a structural process. What is required is a mental makeover; a transpersonal process of transcending beyond the self.⁵⁶

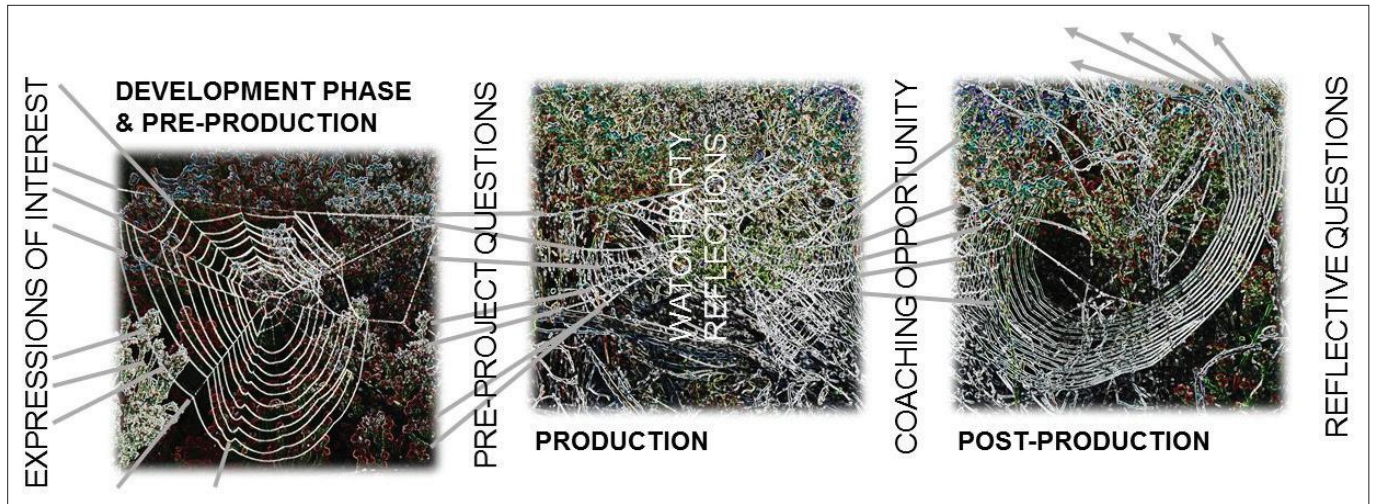
In light of these understandings, the authors suggest that the development of critical self-awareness could expand the participants' understandings of their distinctive figured worlds.⁴⁸ The next section tracks the participating young adults' active engagement in shortfilm-making and the development of critical self-awareness through the lens of the 'Myturn' shortfilm-making project by focusing on the developmental or pre-production phase and the first half of the production phase as shown in Figure 1.

Experiential learning spaces and reflective activities

This section challenges typical humanist qualitative methodology in favour of open methodology to study how participants' active engagement in shortfilm-making helps them build critical self-awareness. A post-qualitative approach to research may address existing issues by introducing new research methodologies in South Africa and internationally.³¹ One author's involvement in Visual Arts and Design in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase allowed us to create an experimental shortfilm-project. The 'Myturn' Initiative created venues to immerse people in experiential learning. An innovative 'shortfilm-making project was presented to 17 ($n = 17$) post-school youths aged 18 to 24 years. Given the small sample size, developmental phenomenography was determined to be a useful research approach.

A key feature of the developmental phenomenographic approach is maximum variation sampling,³⁷ which involves the use of a select group of participants who would enable a multi-perspective view related to the main topic of inquiry. This study aimed to enhance post-school youths' lives, not address the 'deficiencies' of rural communities or draw a comparison between the semi-rural and urban contexts. Although significant, these concepts do not relate to the research focus. Instead, in this research, attention is drawn to the seldom focused 'dynamic interactions of the people who live, learn and work in these communities' and the **variety of different ways they 'engage with and shape their lives in their environments'**.⁵⁷

The three-phase shortfilm-project took place over 10 months in 2020, comprising spaces for reflection before, during and after the development, pre-production, production and post-production phases, as shown in Figure 1. Critical,



Source: Smidt 2022

FIGURE 1: Spider's thread visual metaphor: A flexible conceptual structure for continuous reflection, evaluation, and practice development.

TABLE 1: A description of the criteria and symbols used to consider the participants' level of understanding before, during and after the shortfilm-making project.

Reflection level	Symbol	Description
1	ZR	Zero response indicated that the participant had not attempted in any way to respond to the question.
2	HA	Habitual action occurred when the participants offered an answer without giving it some thought.
3	BU	A basic understanding would show an attempt to understand although the answer given may not be related to real-life applications.
4	RA	Reflective action: A participant's ability to reflect on an understanding would indicate personal insight and/or practical application.
5	CR	Critical reflection would imply a change in perspective, something that should not be expected during the early stages of the project as the participants were developing their reflective skills over time, in the course of the project.
6	FD	Further development in the form of spontaneous responses would indicate a sense of transpersonal growth.

Source: Smidt W. Engaging the transformative potential of shortfilm-making toward critical awareness and transpersonal growth among post-school youth. *Integral Transpers J.* 2020;14(14):26–53. https://doi.org/10.32031/ITIBTE_IJTJ_14-SW2

creative and cultural experiential learning were employed to create a dynamic assemblage of many integrated viewpoints to build a (meta-) model for world perception. This required a smartphone, USB cable, memory card, laptop or PC (optional), editing software, anti-virus security and, most importantly, an Internet connection. These post-school youths resided in semi-rural areas with poor connectivity, making this final piece of equipment a potential impediment. These obstacles created new opportunities for these young people to broaden their perspectives and transcend challenging circumstances in meaningful ways.

New insights from that broadened and integrated sense of self⁽⁵⁰⁾ were meant to help participants handle their personal and social challenges more deliberately and constructively. Hence, the relevance of pre-project question 5 regarding potential challenges with using digital devices and the Internet, as well as the post-Watch Party inquiry during lockdown's required social and physical distancing. Although the research study started before the pandemic, the data collection process was disrupted by the lockdown and social distancing regulations. All those involved in the research responded in

different ways to the unexpected, additional challenges brought about by lockdown regulations and social distancing, a factor whose influence on the research process cannot be ignored.

Within the 'Myturn'-community, we were eager to develop our domain of practice by employing and sharing our own set of resources to find possible ways through which we could explore and evaluate potential experiential learning spaces. Yet, there was a problem. Because the 'Myturn' short-film-making opportunity was based on a sense of willingness to participate to learn with others and to adapt to change and by embracing new perspectives from people other than themselves, it was essential to create a rhythm of persistent communication.

Drawing on the scholarship of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder,¹⁰ the following strategies were implemented to ensure the continuity of the participants' active engagement.

- Face-to-face meetings in workshop format were semi-structured, permitting space for participants' input and spontaneous interactions.
- Facilitating an open dialogue between the researcher's understanding of the essential interactions among 'Myturn' community members' perspectives and the incorporation of external viewpoints from the short-film-audience, where applicable and relevant.
- As the participants' shortfilm-messages were directed at the youth in their communities, it was essential to listen carefully and to hear what those youths were saying:

'In our community, matric is regarded as the end of the study phase for most people. The youth need to become aware of alternative possibilities ... (they) need to learn how to live their lives among bad living conditions that are part of their everyday lives. There was a time in my life that drama and writing helped me to cope with depressing circumstances ... yes, involvement in artistic activities has the potential to change ways of thinking and ways of living.' (post-school adult)

- Thus, different levels of participation were invited into the 'Myturn'-community of practice to ensure, as far as possible, that participants developed a critical self-awareness of multi-dimensional perspectives on reality beyond the boundaries of the self, to promote individual and in turn, societal transformation.⁵³
- The use of both private and public communication spaces provided participants with experiential learning opportunities with them performing different roles as cinematographers and directors of their own stories. If the participants' inter-relationships and intra-connectivity with the youth living in their communities were to be developed in 'sustainable, defensible, responsible and inclusive'⁵⁸ ways, we would need to establish applicable understandings, involving a sense of becoming receptive to the connections between oneself and others and to the environment.⁵⁰ Active engagement in the 'Myturn'-community of practice required taking responsibility for careful consideration of the emerging values when bringing forth different worlds together with others. Here, 'taking responsibility' required learning 'appropriate' ways of knowing as a matter of becoming aware of how human communication creates worlds, which are in processes of becoming: the figured world⁴⁸ within the mind of each participant, as well as within the minds of each audience member. Furthermore, the transpersonal world is marked by an expanded sense of self, including among others, spaces for social interaction within the individuals' communities, virtual platforms and the cinema space that the participants shared with an audience in real-time.
- Moving beyond the limitations of traditional discourse and content analysis, multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA)^{59,60} in combination with a modified six-category evaluation strategy⁶¹ were used to explore (analyse) the evidence (data), comprising participants' pre- and post-project reflections on their active engagement in a shortfilm-making project, as well as individual shortfilm-productions. The participants' abilities to reflect on an understanding because of their active engagement in the shortfilm-project (level 4) would indicate personal insight and the potential for practical application. The level of critical reflection implied a change in their perspectives, a change that would not have been expected during the project's early stages, during which the participants were gradually developing their reflective skills over 10 months.

Their respective messages were characterised by the desire to take their fellow youths out of their familiar and taken-for-granted situations and mind-sets: 'to appreciate the culture that they have even if the past was hard ... you must not expect to be given but work to get it yourself'. Their messages showed a desire to boost the participants' self-confidence in their learning abilities, with an emphasis on values and beliefs, specific strategies and hard work to make the project personally rewarding and meaningful: 'learn from your mistakes'; 'work hard at their dream'; 'strive for what they believe in' (Participant 5) and 'Fighting hard to achieve your

dreams and vision' (Participant 14). Also, 'everything is possible if you just believe' (Participant 6); 'be yourself' (Participant 11) and 'you won't make it unless you then get strategies to play along'. In this last-mentioned message, participant 14 suggested that certain strategies are required to 'make it', while Participant 17's response ('I want to send the message that no matter your past and circumstances, you can build a future') while being positive and encouraging, did not clarify what is required to overcome past circumstances. Because the participants grew up in the same communities as the youth to which their messages were directed, they could relate to the existing conditions within their communities and share hope for something good to materialise beyond their present situation. In her message, participant 15 addressed the youth's abilities 'to comment or talk about the issues that everybody is most likely aware of but refuse to publicly speak or comment on'.

While the authors do not believe this adapted evaluation scheme to be an accurate measure, the strength of this appraisal strategy lies in its capacity to offer a holistic perspective of the participants' development throughout the entire project. Additionally, to prevent the researcher's subjective appraisal of the participants' work and to increase credibility.

Ethical considerations

The post-qualitative approach to inquiry accepts that ethics, being and knowing can be productively entwined, as Barad suggests, in an 'ethico-onto-epistemology',³⁴ which recognises that as beings we are 'becoming with the world' and that 'the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter'.³⁴ However, to comply with institutional protocol, the participating youths confirmed their consent to participate in the 'Myturn' shortfilm-making project by submitting expressions of interest, and ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. To protect the identities of the participants, their names were not revealed; a numbering system was used instead.

'Thinking differently' about findings and analysis

In an attempt to move away from the traditional narrative approach, this section acts as a correspondence between the authors and the reader from the perspectives of the participating post-school youths. Figure 1 shows how reflective questions were employed throughout the three phases of the shortfilm-project to 'open the aperture'⁵⁰ of participants' critical self-awareness and expand their frames of reference through experiential learning. The following seven questions or specifications provided structural threads¹⁴ for the pre-production phase of the shortfilm-making project. Their responses to the following seven pre-project questions served to situate the reader within the participants' 'existing conditions ... and present situation'¹⁷

and 'familiar and the taken-for-granted'¹⁷ contexts within which their visual experiences would transpire:

1. Provide a short bio describing what you have been doing since you finished high school.
2. Which skills that you consider useful have you acquired since leaving school?
3. How did you initially become interested in the 'Myturn' shortfilm-making initiative?
4. What do you expect from the shortfilm-making workshop?
5. What are your specific challenges with using digital devices and the Internet?
6. What message would you like to leave with your shortfilm to the youth of your community?
7. Where would you like to see yourself after this shortfilm-making opportunity for further development?

Each individual brought into this potential learning space their personal beliefs, cultural values, assumptions, traditions, knowledge, skills, desires and expectations. These were significant frames of reference that had to be respected and considered in terms of the acceptance or rejection of what constituted 'new' knowledge constructed through participants' active engagement in the shortfilm-making project. The nature of the participants' 'present situation' relates to their growing up in a screen-orientated world, surrounded by self-learning opportunities to any topic they are interested in without even leaving their room. However, being surrounded by opportunities does not guarantee they are film literate or have developed a critical lens for engaging with 'cultural diversity, technology, and multimodality'^{26,62} among others.

Findings, derived from participants' pre-project responses regarding their interest in developing film literacy competencies related to learning a new art form and/or learning a new art skill; becoming aware of the potential of integrating own 'literacy in film' with a shortfilm-production as part of an existing situation (planned fashion show) and visually documenting own and family activities during the lockdown period. Furthermore, a desire to unveil hidden talent and to change existing conditions of insecure feelings and fear of expressing opinions about daily-life issues. Findings revealed participant expectations to explore what can be done to bring about the kind of desired personal and social changes. Analytical questions concerning the concepts discussed in this article, notably active engagement and critical self-awareness, allowed leitmotifs to arise across all three phases of shortfilm-making. Pertaining to this inquiry, 'leitmotifs' are metaphorical threads¹⁴, 'strings of words that are more than mere words':

- different forms of active engagement and involvement;
- a desire to contribute to society, supported by critical citizenship;
- both figured worlds and arts-based theories inform the creative realm;
- the pursuit of knowledge relates to transformative learning theories and
- spiritual enlightenment is bolstered by perspectives of transpersonal theory.

Because of the 'ethico-onto-epistemological'³⁴ nature of the post-qualitative approach, an attempt to isolate particular findings from the layered palimpsest-landscape across the three phases as illustrated in Figure 1 is problematic. However, for this conversation, the authors direct their attention to two key understandings: firstly, the intra-connectedness of social education, critical self-awareness and transformation and secondly, acquiring and maintaining an objective distance from the self.

The intra-connectedness of social education, critical self-awareness and transformation

The potential for technology to create global change, the option to work remotely while pursuing online education and the ability to meet virtually, align with opportunities for young adults after completing their formal education to thrive in social, cultural, economic and political arenas. Unfortunately, the digital divide remains an unsolved reality for very large numbers of young South African citizens. As this inquiry was situated in a semi-rural geographical area which is known for its continual poor connectivity, asking the participants before the project about possible challenges they might experience with using digital devices and the Internet was essential to ensuring their active participation.

The COVID-19 health crisis revealed the fragility and interconnected nature of the world, as well as disrupting the entire learning ecosystem. Simultaneously, we saw how these consequences provided valuable learning opportunities for students, educators, educational leaders and policymakers as they faced the global crisis. These challenges created spaces for opportunities to transform challenging situations in meaningful ways. Both the project's intended 'Youth Day' and 'Heritage Day' events offered presentation opportunities for the participants' shortfilm-productions. The 'Watch Party' concept was new to most of the participants, and something unanticipated, and that we never expected to turn out in the way that it did. Despite the efforts to stay connected as a research team, not all of the participants had access to the Internet all of the time.

Therefore, an online Youth Day 2020 'Watch Party', which was intended to act as a substitute for the actual screening event, did not reach all the participants simultaneously. Participants' reflective expressions – although few, were crucial, considering continued productivity during lockdown required social and physical distancing. If the 'Myturn' project were to be of any significance as a transformative pedagogy within the participants' non-formal education contexts, their technical knowledge, as revealed in this inquiry needed to be converted into reflective knowledge. The following section zooms in on participant feedback received after the online Youth Day and Heritage Day 'Watch Party' events during 2020. Nine semi-structured, open-ended questions provided a basic structure for participants'

responses in both text and voice messages, as well as visual expressions:

1. Which part of 'Watch Party' did you enjoy most? Why?
2. What was the most challenging? Why?
3. Which new skills have you acquired?
4. Do you regard these skills as useful to you in any way?
5. What did you learn about yourself during the Youth Day project?
6. Do you regard this new knowledge of yourself as useful in any way?
7. What did you want your 'Watch Party' audience to learn from you?
8. What do you think about the potential of making such shortfilms, for young people to learn about themselves and to help them to envision possibilities or their futures?
9. What do you think you are able to do as a result of having experienced all of this Youth Day 'Watch Party' short-film-making event?

These reflective questions were intended to follow the participants' progress during the lockdown period, to help them navigate their transitional learning spaces² and to keep them creatively connected. Across the next sections, 'leitmotifs' or metaphorical strings of words that involve praxis beyond ordinary words¹⁴ are related to specific participant reflections to illustrate the researchers' argument. The findings provided evidence of unexpected opportunities within an unanticipated learning space. Table 4 offers a holistic perspective of the participants' progress throughout the entire Watch Party event. However, for this conversation, the authors focus on WP questions 2 and 9.

TABLE 2: A comparative table, exploring participant responses to challenges in phases 1 and 2.

Development and pre-project Question 5	Watch Party Question 2
What are your specific challenges with using digital devices and the Internet?	What was the most challenging? Why?
Participant 5 asserted: 'I don't have challenges with using digital devices or the Internet'.	Participant 5 described her anxiety about her inadequacy: 'The most challenging thing for me was the criticism because I was scared that I didn't do enough. That it wasn't inspirational and creative enough'.
Participant 6 declared: 'Not having WIFI makes it difficult'.	Participant 6 reminded: 'It takes up a lot of data'.
Participant 14 responded: 'I don't have challenges as such, because I have always been curious about knowing digitals and knowing about sites or software to use to make a great film or video of my work'.	Participant 14 identified a connectivity challenge: 'Nothing was challenging really because the Internet and the social media is what I know. The concerning part though, is the network. Any Internet difficulties can ruin almost everything without you having control over such'.
Participant 17 acknowledged the fact that '[a]nything can happen and you can lose your hard work, so there is always a stress factor involved'.	Participant 17 saw her particular challenge in a positive light: 'As someone who presented poetry that I wrote from pure emotion on the Internet it was challenging to put it all out there without any assurance of how it will go and not knowing who is watching me made me anxious, but I trusted the process and it turned out wonderful'.

Acquiring and maintaining an objective distance from the self

Pertaining to question 2 which addresses challenging situations that might have emerged during the Watch Party event, Table 2 explores participant responses to challenges before and 'after passing through a transitional learning space'.⁶ According to Ball & Slavin-Baden, the original well-documented third space concept denotes 'particular discursive spaces ... in which alternative and competing discourses and positioning transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning'.²

The young participating youths were unexpectedly confronted by the social distancing condition during a year in which face-to-face interaction and shortfilm-making workshops had been planned. In that sense, their internal and external worlds in the face of disjunction present a variety of challenges to emotional, material and social resources. This presents a complex set of practical threats to participants that have not received adequate attention in the literature.² Table 2 provides a comparison between participant responses to pre-project question 5 and post-Watch Party question 2, both addressing challenges involved in active engagement.

Feedback from the participants concerning challenges with technology (Table 3, Question 5) varied from habitual responses and basic understandings to reflective thought and a hint to critical reflection. At this very early stage of the shortfilm-project, the application of advanced reflective skills was not expected from the participants. Their technical knowledge had first to be converted into reflective knowledge if the shortfilm-making project were to be of any significance as a transformative pedagogy within the participants' non-formal education contexts.

TABLE 3: A results table, showing how participants' pre-project responses were aligned to the criteria of the table, introduced in Table 1.

Participant	Reflection levels					
	ZR 1	HA 2	BU 3	RA 4	CR 5	FD 6
Pre-PQ 5: What are your specific challenges with using digital devices and the Internet?						
5	-	HA	-	-	-	-
6	-	-	BU	-	-	-
14	-	-	-	-	CR	-
17	-	-	-	RA	-	-

ZR, zero response; HA, habitual action; BU, basic understanding; RA, reflective action; CR, critical reflection; FD, further development.

TABLE 4: A results table, showing how participants' post-Watch Party reflections were aligned to the criteria of the table, introduced in Table 1.

Participant	Post-watch party results (2020) Questions and corresponding reflection levels								
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
5	RA	RA	RA	CR	CR	CR	RA	RA	CR
6	BU	HA	RA	HA	BU	HA	BU	ZR	RA
14	CR	CR	BU	CR	CR	RA	CR	RA	RA
17	CR	CR	CR	CR	CR	CR	BU	RA	RA

The more detailed reflection Participant 14, however, involving a 'curiosity about knowing digitals' and 'knowing about sites or software to use', reveals a sense of self-confidence in his learning abilities and a sense of curiosity, together with practical application of resources. Participant 17's response describes her feelings when using digital devices and the Internet and not the challenges she has with technology as such.

The second question opened up a space to share issues concerning voice and power that forms part of intercultural competence. Participants' expressions revealed deep-seated issues of uncertainty, fear and anxiety beyond the initial challenges of not having access to the Internet or experiencing bad connectivity.

The most challenging for participants was:

'the criticism because I was scared that I didn't do enough. That it (shortfilm-production) wasn't inspirational and creative enough.' (Participant 5)

'the network' and 'without having control.' (Participant 14)

'to put it all out there without any assurance of how it will go and not knowing who is watching me.' (Participant 17)

Participant 6 mentioned that it takes up a lot of data and explains the consequences of her pre-project reflection of not having WIFI.

WP Q9 addressed participants' thoughts about the practical application of newly acquired understandings: What do you think you can do now that you have gone through this 'Watch Party'-event? This question is relevant concerning the follow-up post-production phase that does not form part of the focus of this article:

'This experience taught me that I can think more outside the box and go bigger with my shortfilm and that I should use my knowledge and the inspiration that I get, not only from everyone and everything around me but also from my peers. To use music, movement and visuals to help tell my story that hopefully can inspire our youth.' (Participant 5)

'Continue my work alone!' (Participant 6)

'I can do more creating and being creative with the new skills I have got through the program. I'm looking forward to creating more work and inspiring others.' (Participant 14)

'Now I received "pointers" on how to act on video, and now I know for the future [*seeing as the technology is becoming more and more part of our lives*].' (Participant 17)

Reflections such as:

'[T]his experience taught me.' (Participant 5)

'new skills I have got through the program.' (Participant 14)

'[N]ow I received "pointers".' (Participant 17)

Such confirms awareness of positive, meaningful learning experiences. Newly acquired abilities:

'I can think more outside the box and go bigger with my shortfilm imply a readiness to accept challenges.' (Participant 5)

Practical application finding is evident through phrases such as:

'hopefully can inspire our youth.' (Participant 5)

'creating more work and inspire others. (Participant 14)

and:

'how to act on video.' (Participant 17)

The shortfilm-making experience empowered participants in different ways, by creating a willingness to listen to and learn from others:

'my inspiration that I get, not only from everyone and everything around me but also from my peers.' (Participant 5)

while Participant 6 prefers working independently. Participant 6's response could easily have been mistaken for an impolite, blunt answer. Fortunately, the 'unseen' circumstances were clarified by her collage and accompanying notes (Figure 2) that illustrated the impact that losing a distinctive human presence has on individuals, communities and society as a whole. The visual expression of her deepest feelings provides a possible reason for her reflection, 'Continue my work alone!' It could be a means to manage her grief and her (creative) way of dealing with the loss of a close friend. Contrastingly, drawing from colour symbolism, the collage might indicate that Participant 6 gained the strength to 'continue her work alone' and 'come to terms with and reconcile'¹⁶ herself to reality.

Expressions such as: 'I should use my knowledge and my inspiration.' (Participant 5)

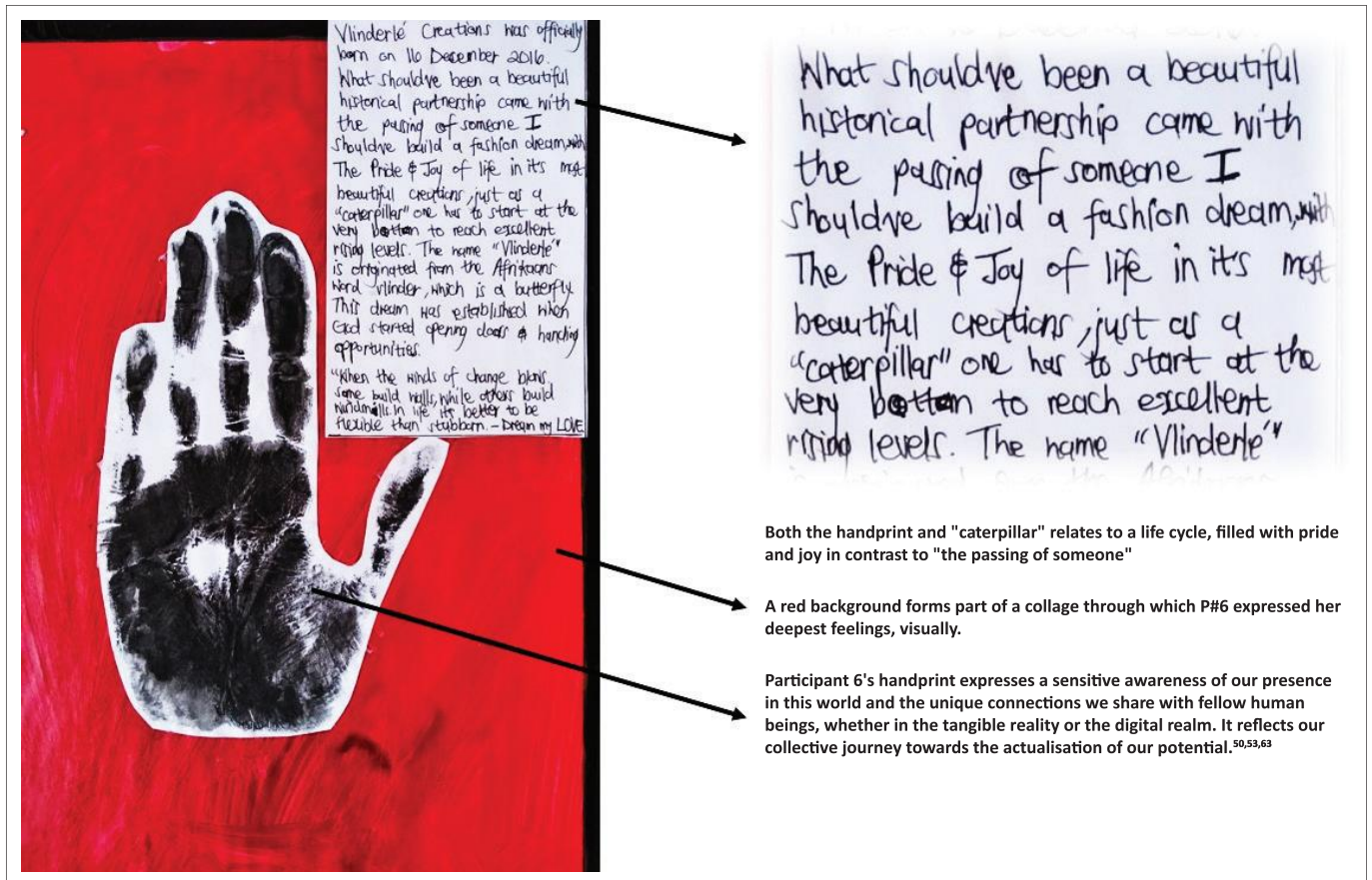
'I'm looking forward to creating more work and inspiring others.' (Participant 14)

'now I know for the future ... technology is becoming more and more parts of our lives.' (Participant 17)

Indicate a sense of sharing and a kind of social and community connection motivated by altered states of the mind that develop over time. These reflections confirm the development of an empowered attitude towards continuing their work and the importance of technology in today's world.

Conclusion

This inquiry responded to the need for additional research into the transformative potential of critical self-awareness in a non-formal education context in South Africa. A synthesis of arts-based, post-qualitative and developmental phenomenographic approaches was employed to create, explore and communicate evidence in ways that present a holistic picture of alternative pathways to knowledge production. As such, this article contributes to transdisciplinarity as a way of thinking differently about contemporary research. The 'Myturn' shortfilm-making-project was designed as an opportunity for developing a critical lens on lifelong learning opportunities through experiential engagement with emerging shortfilm-making technology, the appreciation of cultural differences and a multimodal approach to social interaction. Implementation of shortfilm-making was



Note: Participant 6 feedback.

FIGURE 2: A personal critical reflection following the death of a friend, visualised through an artistic expression, supported by a written dedication.

considered to have responded to the dearth of practical research on the arts-based doctorate as an emerging genre within academic research beyond simply being 'artistic'. According to Kandinsky, the cinematic medium, like all the arts, is ultimately the ideas, emotions and feelings of a 'personal' mind (or minds) being stretched outward to other minds.⁶⁴ The continuous, cyclical nature of the transpersonal process found relevance in the participants' capacity to critically reflect on their own and others' assumptions, knowledge, belief systems, behaviours, frames of mind and how situations and events are viewed in real-life practice within this inquiry. Furthermore, the young participating citizens needed to expand their formal schooling environment skills to multimodal and film literacy skills to become 'border-crossers capable of engaging, learning from, understanding and being tolerant of and responsible to matters of difference and otherness'²⁰ The authors of this present study maintain that the question about the participating post-school youths' abilities to become change agents in their communities was addressed through transformative praxis,³² guided by a critical self-awareness of their positionality. However, challenges remain in developing new competencies for young people to access potential livelihood opportunities and navigate the digital world, thus emphasising the relevance of ongoing learning and adaption. In the words of Keith Holyoak¹⁴: 'The spider's web is another metaphor, perhaps several. However, dense the weave, the web creates not a wall but a net with spaces that let light pass through it'.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the editors, May Bingham, Jackie Viljoen and Rose Jackson, for their guidance and advice through various stages of dissertation writing, which inspired this article conceived.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

W.S. presented the original idea, designed the 'Myturn' shortfilm-making project for the investigation, facilitated the data-creation process and performed the analysis, interpretation, validation and presentation of the findings through text, visualisations including figures, tables and photography. Z.W. supervised the project. Both authors discussed the results and commented on the manuscript.

Funding information

This research received no direct funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF). However, the researcher acknowledges Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) for partially funding the editing of this dissertation and contributing to this article's publication.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study (pertaining to the particular focus of this article) are available within the article. The data that support the findings of the entire study will be available from the CPUT repository. The researcher will communicate further details as soon as a reference number has been allocated. For correspondence relating to this journal article, the manuscript reference number is 1382.

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