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Walker, G. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2176-8604 (2013) Climate change oppression: media production as the practice of freedom. Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development, 9 (1). pp. 97-106. ISSN 1948-3074 doi: 10.7916/D8CN749B Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86056/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7916/D8CN749B

Publisher: Columbia University Libraries

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Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development
Vol. 9, Iss. 1 (2012), Pp. 97 – 106

Climate Change Oppression: Media Production as the Practice of Freedom

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Abstract

Communities most vulnerable to climate change must educate themselves on how to adapt to the new challenges they face. The use of participatory media, especially video, can be an effective tool for doing so, allowing users to incorporate indigenous knowledge and create an alternative to the dominant, objectifying narratives of conservation and development. Following the methodology of educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, a program in community-based media, with an emphasis on social and environmental action, has the potential to empower the world's oppressed against the challenges of the coming decades.

Author's Note

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Keywords: participatory approach, climate change, adaptation, media, Freire.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

> *Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it.*
>
> –Paulo Freire[1]

In the foreword to educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull elaborates on Freire's notion of education as the practice of freedom, writing that it is "the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."[2] In the

[1] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International.
[2] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International.

case of climate change, education as the practice of freedom can grant men and women the power to adapt to a world that is transforming around them as a result of phenomena largely beyond their control. These are the people whom Freire refers to as "the oppressed," and are otherwise known euphemistically as the poor or disenfranchised. Victims of the greed and negligence of distant societies, these men and women are oppressed because they suffer from a form of global injustice—climate change. They are the most vulnerable to environmental threats, while at the same time possessing the lowest capacity to adapt.

The importance of climate change adaptation cannot be overemphasized. Adaptation strengthens the resiliency of communities and increases their capacity to deal with threats. The participatory approach to adaptation is essential because it engages the community, rather than just the individual, and it is at the community level that climate change adaptation will be most successful.

According to media scholar Henry Jenkins, "We are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced."[3] The purpose of this paper is to present the concept that media production in itself is education as the practice of freedom, and that through the application of participatory media education, the oppressed can adapt both to climate change and to the objectifying forces of the current inequitable world order.

1.2 Foundational Concepts

Participatory video (PV) is a technique in which trained professionals teach basic video production skills, such as storyboarding, framing, and camera operation to a motivated but relatively unskilled group of people. The traditional concept of participatory video is used widely in education, activism, and development.

Existing participatory video models substantially influence the media-based participatory approach advocated in this paper. Although a diverse range of media can be incorporated into the participatory approach (radio, print, etc.), this paper will focus almost exclusively on video. Video is arguably the most powerful of the aforementioned media, with the greatest capacity to communicate and engender change. This is reflected in the steady rise of video consumption worldwide. The seamless integration of video and the Internet, along with the surge of online video content, means that the worldwide consumption of media that utilizes video will only continue to grow. According to a 2010 Cisco report, ninety percent of Internet traffic will be video by the year 2015, with one million minutes of video content crossing the network every second. Currently, IP traffic is growing fastest in Latin America, followed by the Middle East and Africa.[4]

More significant, however, is the impact that video production has on the producers themselves, especially in relation to education as the practice of freedom. No other form of media requires producers to play such an active role in their work.

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[3] Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

[4] *Cisco visual networking index: Forecast and methodology, 2010-2015*. (2012, May). San Jose, CA: Cisco.

Video makers must physically be at the location of their subjects and must interact with them directly. Video production is more than just reporting—it requires critical thinking, teamwork, and engagement. This process is what makes video production such a profound and transformative experience for participants. At once, they become storytellers, activists, and creators of knowledge and information.

It should also be noted that vulnerability, when referring to a community threatened by climate change, natural disasters, or other forms of environmental degradation, implies a community with low adaptive capacity, therefore qualifying it as "oppressed." Many regions of the world will be greatly affected by anticipated climate change, from Manhattan to Bangladesh. What makes Manhattan different from Bangladesh, however, is its capacity, backed by the resources of a powerful and wealthy government, to adapt to that change.

2. The Need for Climate Change Adaptation

Even with reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, it is projected that global temperatures and sea levels will continue to rise, and that extreme weather events associated with climate change will become more frequent.[5] For this reason, it is essential that adaptation, along with mitigation, be considered an important response to climate change.[6]

The variability of climate change effects on a given community differs for a number of reasons. According to a 2010 Oxfam report, poverty, above any other factor, determines a community's vulnerability, as it puts a limit on its capacity to adapt.[7] The poverty is usually then compounded by a high dependence on natural resources. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment states that, "Most of the world's 2.7 billion poor people depend on natural resources (water, forests, seas, soil, biodiversity, and so on) for survival and economic development, but the environment and the world's natural resources are already being substantially degraded and increasingly being affected by changes in the climate."[8]

Here, it is important to note that, for these natural resource dependent communities, the threat of climate change lies mainly in extreme events, rather than average climate variability. The Australian Climate Commission reports that, "Many of the impacts of climate change are due to extreme weather events, not changes in average values of climatic parameters. The most important of these are high temperature-related events, such as heat waves and bushfires; heavy precipitation events; and storms, such as tropical cyclones and hailstorms."[9]

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[5] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2007). *Climate change 2007: Synthesis report* (R. K. Pachauri & A. Reisinger, Eds.). Geneva, Switzerland.

[6] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2001). *Adaptation to climate change in the context of sustainable development and equity* (B. Smit & O. Pilifosova, Authors). Geneva, Switzerland.

[7] Pettengell, C. (2010, April). *Oxfam Research Reports: Climate change adaptation: Enabling people living in poverty to adapt*. Oxfam International.

[8] *Millennium ecosystem assessment*. (2005). Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

[9] Commonwealth of Australia Climate Commission. (2011, November). *The critical decade: Climate science, risks, and responses*.

Furthermore, Oxfam highlights that men and women will be affected differently by climate change. Because women are more frequently marginalized by unequal access to resources and opportunities, they have an even higher level of vulnerability.[10]

In the Anthropocene, the warming of the earth's climate system is undeniable.[11] Despite the global body of knowledge, however, information at the local level is often insufficient for people to make conventional planning decisions.[12] The following selection from Oxfam's 2010 report on climate change adaptation is particularly noteworthy because it stresses the importance of education in the adaptation process:

> "Adaptation is…not a choice between reducing general vulnerability or preparing for specific hazards, such as floods; adaptation requires both, in an ongoing change process whereby people can make informed decisions about their lives and livelihoods in a changing climate. *Learning* to adapt is as important as any specific adaptation intervention."[13]

Because adaptation can be social, economic, or ecological, there is a need for an equitable, interdisciplinary approach to educating people about climate change. This can be achieved by designing approaches on a case-by-case basis. The diversity of adaptations across all sectors, including the variety of stakeholders, makes it "infeasible to systematically evaluate lists of particular adaptation measures."[14] The threats that communities face, their current level of resilience, and their adaptive capacity must all be taken into account.

Adaptation to climate change and sustainable development are closely linked by a number of factors. As such, increasing the adaptive capacity of a community frequently involves the same implementation methodology as sustainable development. Sustainable development implemented without any understanding of climate change can be hugely detrimental and even increase a community's vulnerability. It is, therefore, imperative that climate hazards and risks be taken into account when planning sustainable development initiatives.[15]

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[10] Pettengell, C. (2010, April). *Oxfam Research Reports: Climate change adaptation: Enabling people living in poverty to adapt*. Oxfam International.

[11] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2007). *Climate change 2007: Synthesis report* (R. K. Pachauri & A. Reisinger, Eds.). Geneva, Switzerland.

[12] Pettengell, C. (2010, April). *Oxfam Research Reports: Climate change adaptation: Enabling people living in poverty to adapt*. Oxfam International.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2001). *Adaptation to climate change in the context of sustainable development and equity* (B. Smit & O. Pilifosova, Authors). Geneva, Switzerland.

[15] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2001). *Adaptation to climate change in the context of sustainable development and equity* (B. Smit & O. Pilifosova, Authors). Geneva, Switzerland.

3. The Participatory Approach

Although people in more developed regions have greater access to media, especially the Internet, it is the very protean nature of this media that allows it to be successful in developing areas, where citizens, as illustrated above, are the most vulnerable to climate change. Regardless of the setting, however, the importance of a participatory approach to education remains the same. Jenkins succinctly writes: "A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices."[16]

In their field handbook, *Insights into Participatory Video*, Nick and Chris Lunch write, "PV is a tool for positive social change; it is a means of empowerment for the marginalized and it is a process that encourages individuals and communities to take control of their destinies."[17] This is largely due to the fact that, with participatory video, these marginalized groups are able to exercise a high degree of artistic control to tell their story the way they want it told. They can create their own video concepts, arranging and capturing the shots in the order that they are intended to be presented.

Also fundamental to this educational and skills-building technique is its focus on community engagement. Producing a video requires teamwork and group decision-making as well as shared ownership of the completed project. As Jenkins writes, "new media literacies should be seen as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply as individualized skills to be used for personal experience."[18]

Participatory videos, in theory, differ from traditional documentary films because they more fully represent the voice of the participants. Documentary films will always, to some extent, reflect the views of the filmmakers, however sensitive they may be towards their subjects. In additional, participatory videos are usually not intended to meet the standards of professional documentary films, as they are often made with specific audiences and objectives in mind.[19]

Participatory videos can take many forms and are made for a wide variety of purposes. In the context of climate change, there is evidence that these videos improve the way in which vulnerable communities use climate information.[20] They often have the power to affect change where more traditional informational sources have failed. Suarez, Benn, and Macklin argue, "Current inequities in patterns of flow

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[16] Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

[17] Lunch, N., & Lunch, C. (2006). *Insights into participatory video: A handbook for the field*. Oxford, United Kingdom: InsightShare

[18] Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

[19] Lunch, N., & Lunch, C. (2006). *Insights into participatory video: A handbook for the field*. Oxford, United Kingdom: InsightShare.

[20] Suarez, P., Ching, F., Ziervogel, G., Wisner, B., Mendler de Suarez, J., Lemaire, I., & Turnquest, D. (2008). Video-mediated approaches for community-level climate adaptation. *IDS Bulletin*, *39*(4), 96-104.

and use of information make it very difficult for national and sub-national governments, humanitarian and development organizations and other stakeholders to reach the 'last mile' where adaptation measures are most needed."[21] Participatory videos, though, allow producers to bypasses these inequities. According to Lunch and Lunch, they can be used "to communicate the situation and ideas of local people to development workers and formal researchers and to decision-makers and policymakers."[22] As such, their potential to influence is profound.

4. Collective Action Media Production

Collective action media production (CAMP) is an umbrella term referring to the participatory model introduced in the previous sections. This section will highlight the ways in which CAMP projects differ from typical development-based and NGO-facilitated media projects.

In Freire's "banking" model of education, information flows in one direction only, from a "teacher," considered knowledgeable, to a "student," considered to know nothing. This model projects an absolute ignorance onto others and is thus characteristic of the ideology of oppression. The alternative to this form of education is what Freire calls "problem-posing," or education as the practice of freedom. In the problem-posing model, "people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."[23]

CAMP projects fall directly in line with this "problem-posing" concept of education. The guiding forces of a CAMP project are the participants and the facilitators. Traditional media, as used by many NGOs and developmental organizations, falls more closely in line with the "banking" model, which is rarely successful at empowering marginalized people. Collective action media production, however, is inherently empowering—it is a tool *belonging to* oppressed peoples in their struggle to overcome objectifying forces.

5. Policy Implications of CAMP

In order to establish a CAMPsite, or place where the CAMP model is practiced, there must be a high level of motivation among members of the community. Levels of vulnerability and adaptive capacity must be taken into account, and educators responsible for establishing a CAMPsite must be familiar with the local community. Ideally, the educators themselves would be members of the community, but at the very least, they must be sensitive to the area's cultural and geographical issues. It is the responsibility of the educators to ensure that the CAMP

[21] Suarez, P., Benn, J., & Macklin, C. (2011, April). *World Resources Report: Putting vulnerable people at the center of communication for adaptation: The case for knowledge sharing through participatory games and video tools*. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

[22] Lunch, N., & Lunch, C. (2006). *Insights into participatory video: A handbook for the field*. Oxford, United Kingdom: InsightShare, 13.

[23] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International.

program stays on track and remains in the custodianship of the participants. The participation of women and youth must also be encouraged.

A long-term commitment is ideal since the goal is not to produce a single video or piece of media, but to establish a collective action group that will grow to develop and create its own projects. As experience bolsters the confidence and skills of the group, the media that they create will reflect greater sophistication and purpose.

CAMPsites reinforce the principle that decisions should be made at the lowest level of any hierarchy, where issues can be most effectively managed. This is especially pertinent in regards to climate change adaptation. According to David Hunter, a preeminent scholar of environmental law and policy, "decisions made at the local level are often viewed as more likely to take account of local environmental conditions and the opinions of the local people who often bear the highest environmental costs of development decisions."[24]

Collective action media production is also a viable way to integrate indigenous knowledge into climate and environmental issues. Up to this point, the value of indigenous knowledge in regards to climate change has received painfully little attention. With collective action media production, however, doing so is at the heart of the participatory approach.

Educators will provide CAMPsites with video production tools and basic skills training. They should make long-term commitments to the community, rather than just visiting for a two or three-day training and video production workshop. For some period of time, they should be available as resources to the community, giving them the initial confidence needed to transform ideas into videos.

In the CAMP model, emphasis is on the process of production, not the output. The opportunity for more people to participate, in whatever capacity, is valued over what is actually produced by any given group. The emphasis is on engagement and not efficiency. Values such as high productivity and efficiency, which are associated with growth and capital, should have only secondary roles in the program, meaning their importance is significant only after all of the primary goals of the program have been met. The primary goals are participation, horizontal community engagement, teamwork, critical thought, and collective action.

6. A Note on Access

The lack of access to media around the world has been a major barrier to entry. What are the implications of having a CAMPsite in a remote corner of the world, where it may be unlikely that reliable electricity will even be available, much less connectivity to the online global network of information?

Collective action media production is a process-based rather than ends-based program. The limitations imposed upon a finished video, or piece of media, by the realities of global inequalities to access should not unnecessarily be imposed upon the production process, which, using Freire's "problem-solving" method of education, is the transformative element of the program.

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[24] Hunter, D., Salzman, J., & Zaelke, D. (2011). *International environmental law and policy* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Foundation Press.

A fundamental principle behind collective action media production is that a lack of access to media should not be used as a reason to deny entry to the process of media making. The educators can help a collective action group try to realize any goals that they may have for the exhibition or distribution of their finished work, but this is secondary, and limited avenues for exhibition should not preclude production. Because of the archival properties of digital media, whatever is produced will be waiting once the access gap has been closed.

The creation of media content using Freire's approach reverses the traditional direction of information. Knowledge and ideas are sent up the chain, rather than down. This type of information uploading creates a greater demand for access. In the developing world, this will effectively put added pressure on nations to improve their Internet infrastructure.

In the future, the media created by CAMPsites could be hosted on a global visual interface based on the geographical features of the planet, such as Google Earth. If groups so choose, their projects could be uploaded to this interface and become accessible to all people, with its information defined not by political borders but by the geography of the environment.

7. Conclusion

Collective action media production is education as the practice of freedom, and through its practical application, the oppressed can adapt to both climate change and the objectifying forces of an unjust world order. Against the backdrop of climate change, the world's most vulnerable—those with the lowest capacity to adapt to change—must become the architects of their own awareness, education, and empowerment. This is the confluence of environmentalism and problem-posing education.

As technology changes the way we communicate, it is important that education keep pace with information. Collective action media production is based on two tested approaches to education: participatory video and "problem-posing" pedagogy. Together, they have the potential to inspire oppressed communities to rise to roles of empowerment, forming the foundation upon which a new world will be established.

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