

# The Hero's Journey: An art-based method in social design

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## Abstract

The Hero's Journey is an embodied game activity based on the monomyth of Joseph Campbell (1949). This participatory art-based activity served as a research instrument in a development context in southern Africa with marginalised San youth. One of the outcomes of employing this art-based activity in research was the development of the GRACE model which encompasses grass-root participation, art, creativity, embodiment, expression and empowerment. This paper asks how participatory and art-based methods enable the dialogical and solution orientated GRACE model to function in development work within marginalised communities. The paper discusses how improvisation facilitates power distribution when participatory art-based methods are applied. Improvisation permits continuous negotiation processes with stakeholders, thus enabling communities to participate in development activities in power sensitive settings.

KEYWORDS: narrative, improvisation, Hero's Journey, GRACE model

## Introduction

The research paper is based on two service design projects: *My Dream World*, 2013-2015, and *PARTY* (Participatory Development with Youth), 2015-2019. The *My Dream World* project reached out to indigenous communities and unemployed youth in South Africa and Namibia. The stakeholders include the South African San Institute (SASI), that supports indigenous rights and development issues in South Africa and in Namibia, Ombetja Yehinga Organisation (OYO), that raises HIV, sexual health, drug, alcohol, discrimination and stigmatisation awareness, various cultural and educational institutions

such as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Namibian University of Technology and Krunuhaka Secondary School (Miettinen & Sarantou 2017). PARTY is supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE), project H2020-MSCA-RISE-2014. This project researches and develops new participatory and empowering service design tools used by youth participants, NGOs and other service providers. PARTY focuses on South Africa's indigenous San youth in Platfontein and Upington.

Both projects have contributed to the conceptualisation of the GRACE (Grass-root, Art, Creativity and Embodiment / Expression / Empowerment) model. This model aims to utilise and build on creative potential and skills of the San youth with emphasis on tradition and storytelling that shape the social fabric of these communities. In addition, the model embraces the embodied action that is utilised for team building, creating a sense of community, learning and structure amongst youth participants. The GRACE model was developed by Satu Miettinen and other team members who participated in these projects.

This paper discusses the Hero's Journey as a complex synthesis of tools based on drama, storytelling, creative writing and coaching, that was developed by Taina Kontio during both projects. The Hero's Journey is an embodied game activity based on the monomyth of Joseph Campbell (1949), but the activity also served as a data collection procedure in the research processes of both projects. The Hero's Journey approach is transformative as it is action oriented, participatory and sensitive to power structures (Leavy 2017, p. 234). This approach is a good example of the intervening power of art-based research in marginalised communities. This paper explores the Hero's Journey activity as a method for participatory art-based research and illustrates how the data retrieved from this activity was used to shape the GRACE model.

The role of improvisation in the execution and application of this activity will also be reviewed. The paper explores how the Hero's Journey, underpinned by improvisation, stimulates a 'transformative paradigm' based on social justice approaches that are actively inclusive of marginalised participants in the entire research process (Leavy 2017, p. 233). This approach ensures that ethical, societal and environmental challenges of the research process are met due to close contact with, and immersion into, the lives and worlds of the research participants (Hamdi 2014, p. 35).

## Review of literature

The literature considered for this paper explains the relationship between narratives and performing arts. The theory of monomyth as developed by Campbell (2004), the term improvisation and its role in design and other creative processes, as well as participatory and art-based research, will also be reviewed.

### *Narratives and performing arts*

Narrative's rationality is embedded in explaining, expressing, understanding and holistically constituting human life. This means that individuals continually attempt to hold themselves and their 'self' together through stories (Ricoeur 2004, p. 243). 'In stories, the force of soul is conveyed in so many ways', says Estes (2004, p. xiv). Stories and the narrative function are central to human life with the ability to form and shape parts into meaningful wholes. Narrative temporality is entangled in various spaces, places and in personal histories, thus narrative is a basic human strategy, or practical wisdom, that assists individuals in dealing with and making sense of their experiences (Ricoeur 1992, p. 114-116). Estes (2004) explains: 'Story can mend and story can heal. If courage and bravery are the muscles of the spiritual drive that help a person to become whole, then stories are the bones' (p. xxiii-lxv).

Storytelling's value towards social cohesion and connectiveness is widely appreciated as it brings different people and their values together as stories can cross cultural boundaries. Stories emerge from and journeys through all cultures, encouraging encounter and mutual understanding among different people, hospitality, sharing and the interest for the other (Petrilli & Ponzio 2000, p. 47). Storytelling traditions and the importance of storytelling for emotional wellbeing in non-western cultures is for example highlighted by Marjorie Shostak's (1981) ethnography on San women of southern Africa (p. 36).

Stories are acted since they are told in specific settings and moments, therefore their temporal and spatial qualities result in them never being retold in the same fashion. Further, their enactment and performative character involves an audience to which they are told and performed which in turn influences the specific ways in which telling and retelling occur (Venn 2006). Thus, narrative and performing arts are intricately connected through dreamed, performed, written and documented stories that are acted and received by audiences. Multiple art forms are included under the more general term of performing

arts, including drama, music, dance and performance arts. The goal of drama is explained by Damiano, Lombardo and Pizzo (2005): ‘to make audience perceive what is intuitively called a “story” by exhibiting the actions of some *characters* (in conflict); actions are organized in a *plot*; the plot moves toward a *direction*’ (p. 95). The educational role of drama in the ‘real’ world is explained by Üstündağ (1997):

*Drama is defined as the most significant model of learning and is a basic activity for learning. In drama, [participants] draw on their knowledge and experience of the real world in order to create a make-believe world. Thus, drama is [...] built on dreams and voices (p. 89).*

### **Campbell's Monomyth**

The Hero's Journey activity is based on Joseph Campbell's monomyth titled *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's monomyth is based on the study of myths that appear in folk tales and rituals, thus it is considered a universal storyline found in many cultures. Some authors, for example Elwood (1999), have pointed out that the monomyth erodes the differences between cultural myths through oversimplification (p. x). In the monomyth, the hero embarks on a journey battling past ‘personal, local and historical limitations’ to encounter new realities (Campbell 2004, p. 18). This means that the hero dies to be reborn within a new reality, followed by a return to society with the lessons learnt from the transfiguration (ibid.). The hero's passage is ‘inward’ and self-reflective, with the aim to overcome resistance so that lost powers are revived (Campbell 2004, p. 27).

Campbell's (2004) theory of monomyth is based on the ‘mythological adventure of the hero [which] is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return’ (p. 28). These elements shape the monomyth (Campbell 2004, p. 28). The separation or departure stage calls the hero to adventure, who may hesitate to accept the call, but during the journey to adventure unsuspected assistance may be rendered by supportive people. Finally, the hero will cross a ‘threshold into the night’ (Campbell 2004, p. 34). The next phase involves the trials and victories of initiation and temptation, followed by rebirth. Finally, during the last phase the hero returns and reintegrates with society, sharing and recirculating the essential newly accomplished energy into the world (ibid.). The Hero's Journey storyline was applied by many Hollywood script writers and Vogler often adjusted the storyline to suit the needs of film producers and writers (Vogler 1985).

The full circle of life, with the ideas of Sigmund Freud underpinning a part of the circle and Carl Jung's theories the other, also shapes Campbell's ideas on monomyth (Campbell 2004, p. 11). While Freud's theories focus on the first half cycle, starting from infancy, through adolescence towards adulthood, Jung focuses on the last part of the life cycle when people face the crises of old age and death (ibid.). Campbell stresses though that there is a phase where 'in order to advance, the shining sphere must submit to descend and disappear' (ibid.). Thus, a loose circular structure is used in the Hero's Journey game to guide players through performed activities during which they work through imagined situations, for example to face their fears and desires, to complete the 'full circle' (ibid.).

### *Improvisation*

Improvisation, or *improvisus*, refers to 'the unforeseen, the ambiguous or the uncertain' (Nachmanovitch 1991, p. 240). Improvisation is perceived to be inferior to innovation, chaos, and the second-best solution to a problem (Secchi 2012; Peters 2009; Montuori 2003; Nachmanovitch 1990). Design processes are overshadowed by academic discussions that focus on innovation, while the role of improvisation is often overlooked. This notion results in the use of innovation as a shallow and over-used concept, often lacking applicability (Miettinen, personal conversation).

The strength in improvisation lies in its multidirectional character that enables creative and research practitioners to read responses from their environments and process changes. Secchi (2012) explains:

*The idea of improvisation is, therefore, not one of uncontrolled chaos, but one of accurate design of a system in which some parts are allowed free variation in order to provide the requisite variety that compensates for environmental turbulence (p. 8).*

Improvisors draw on their intuition, their emotional experiences and automatic emotional judgements to these experiences, generated within their environment and from actions (Dunn et al. 2010, p. 1838). Improvisation therefore tolerates failure on the one hand while it draws on judgement and fine-tuning to facilitate improvement and solutions to tricky problems. Starting with negotiation, the process often returns to more negotiations, thus enabling innovation.

A framework for improvisatory processes has been proposed by Sarantou and Miettinen (2017). The framework suggests the embeddedness of practitioners' knowing in action as processes unfold during improvisation (Hallam & Ingold 2007). The framework suggests that improvisatory processes are underpinned by intuition which are emotional reactions that flow from stimuli in a practitioner's environment, thus involving the 'interplay of knowing and sensing' (Sadler-Smith & Shefy 2004, p. 76). Guided by previous experiences, improvisers gain new experiences as their processes progress.

### *Art-based and participatory research*

Art-based and participatory research approaches enable responses to complexities. Ad hoc solutions and 'reflection in action' (Schon 2001, p. 9), are often needed in art-based research methods. McNiff (2008) defines:

*Art-based research is the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies (p. 29).*

The Hero's Journey is an art-based method. It draws on both fiction-based research (FBR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Leavy 2017, p. 199 & 224). The activity includes the research participants and their communities in the entire research process (Leavy 2017, p. 199), by utilising a fictitious story, narratives and performances to process current realities and imagined possibilities that generates data. The strength of CBPR lies in its problem centeredness, collaborative and social action approach that stimulates trust and rapport amongst community stakeholders, participants and researchers alike (Leavy 2017, p. 237-241; Hamdi 2010, p. 87). Above all, this research approach is experiential, flexible, improvisatory and focused on adapting and revising next steps.

'Art-based researchers aim to suggest new ways of viewing [social] phenomena' (Barone and Eisner 1997, p. 96). Art-based approaches to research cultivate empathy and self-reflection through the disruption of dominant narratives by utilising performance and storytelling (Leavy 2017, p. 224). Based on storylines and plots with relatable characters, when FBR is practiced, it allows for accessibility through engagement in roles that are familiar to the participants. Additionally, art-based research does not seek out certainty,

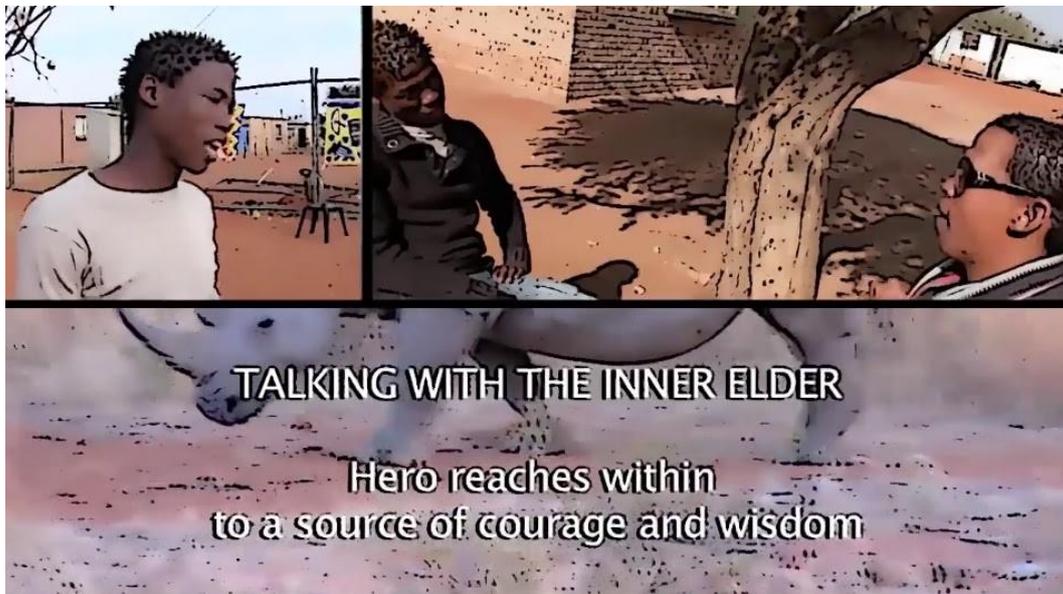
but instead enhances perspectives.

## The Hero's Journey

Personal stories involve problems and questions about everyday life. The role of story underpins the purpose of the activity Hero's Journey, which is healing. No matter how far removed people are from their heritage in a temporal or spatial sense, the function of story will never perish, because people's psyches are driven by the need to teach and nurture the self and others (Estes 2004, p. xxiii-lxv). In the Hero's Journey activity, the game participants similarly draw on story, drama and performance to act out their personal journeys. First, the participants are introduced to the Hero by contemplating the nature and gender of a hero by discussing examples of feminine and everyday heroism, including examples from the participants' own cultural backgrounds.

The Hero then creates a personal story by imagining and envisaging an ideal day when personal dreams have been achieved, with the help of a selected mentor and allies. The narrative function is employed to communicate amongst players that usually don't exceed a group of four. The Hero chooses a team player as a Mentor amongst other characters, such as friends and allies to assist them. Kontio and the participants often create suitable characters, perhaps teachers or other officials that the group might need. The players, apart from the Hero and Mentor, act as the human resources the Hero can draw on, by fulfilling supportive roles, during the journey towards their goals. Performativity and story is used to overcome problems by integrating different personas and resources in their plots.

The importance of participatory and improvised script writing of the Hero's storyline and plot assist participants to express their envisaged challenges, strengths, weaknesses or talisman powers needed along the journey. In carefully pre-written form, which is in itself data, the journey is carefully considered before the adventure. Kontio draws on various tools, for example in the third act of the journey she combines a 'hot seat' tool used in process drama to communicate with the inner elder. This is a creative writing tool by Cameron (1999) that assists participants to play or perform talks with their inner elder. In the field, Kontio draws upon twelve years of story coaching and media-art experiences, combined with teaching animation and video work.



**Figure 1. Still image from the video titled *Heroes of Kimberley* by Taina Kontio.**

A large circle is mapped on the floor of an open space in which the game is performed. The circle serves as a 'stage', which is divided into quarters. Kontio often includes temporal dimensions into the game by suggesting to players that each quarter of the stage represents two years. This allows players to envision their goals for each quarter. Neelands (2011) explains that learning in open spaces and the use of circular shapes and structures support trust and empathy amongst participants (p.1). In this way, circles and open spaces become powerful means for decolonisation as power structures are eroded and mutuality encouraged (ibid.).

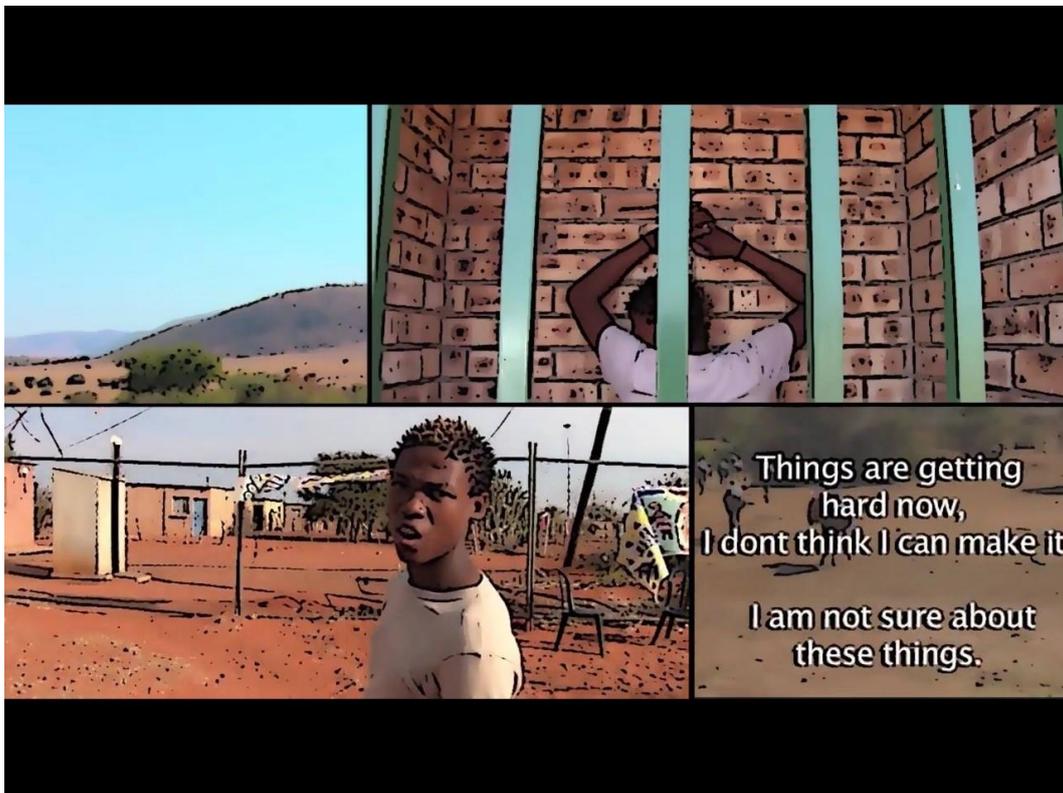
The Hero's personal story will image a day in the future when their dreams have been fulfilled. Planning and thinking underpins this process with the goal to work through personal hopes and dreams, finding an ideal imagined world. The Hero then sets out to identify problems, find solutions and use practical steps and possible processes to work towards an ideal situation. Campbell's theory of monomyth is loosely applied in the quarters to guide players through phases of separation, initiation and return. Separation from current circumstances comes about by developing their dreams. The phase of initiation entail defining personal challenges, such as self-belief, and new possibilities or solutions, internal or external resources that are needed for reaching the goals, or the need to develop new emotional and mental strengths or characteristics. The return follows in the last quarter when the Hero, empowered with new knowledge and understanding about their personal situation and possibilities, have the potential to invests new energy into

their communities.

The strong elements of embodiment in the Hero's Journey come about through performances such as storytelling, negotiations and choices in each of the quarters, while players physically journey through each quarter to reach the end of the game. The hero displays courage by physically journeying through personal obstacles, think through solutions and reach for a dream. Through processes of facing self-realisation and finally, self-mentoring, the Hero sets out to overcome personal challenges or hardships. This activity is empowering as it draws on personal life stories that are performed ad hoc, while the processes are spontaneous, intuitive and experimental, therefore unleashing creative action and expression.

The game is improvised, which means it is performed in a given moment and environment in which the players draw on their intuition and previous experiences to process choices for reaching new possibilities. Kontio prefers to use terms such as 'play', 'perform' or 'body storm' when she refers to improvisation during her activities as these terms are less intimidating to participants when the Hero's Journey is introduced and acted (Kontio, personal conversation). The methods of co-writing and 'serious play' (Shrage 1999), also integrated, are applied to the Hero's Journey from the tradition of 'devised theatre' and process drama (Perry 2011). Serious play has been adopted in Service Design as a method of body storming to test new services (Miettinen, personal conversation). Reframing the game in terms of playing or body storming eliminates fear of the term improvisation, which is best avoided during the game as participants may be unfamiliar with this term's complex meanings. Within a secure game structure, the flexibility and multidirectionality of improvisation is important as it allows participants to find solutions to their challenges and new possibilities during the journey.

From Kontio's experiences it is best to start the game by using practical examples and create memories through role playing, to enable envisaged futures. Role and game playing offer immediate familiarity to participants, enabling especially the younger participants to comfortably plunge into the Hero's Journey. The Hero's plot and performance is captured as data through notes, short films or photos produced by the participants and Kontio. This media deepens the experience when the Hero reaches the goal at the end of the journey (see <https://vimeo.com/102132331>).



**Figure 2. Still image from the video titled *Heroes of Kimberley* by Taina Kontio.**

The Hero is often moved by the journey due to deep reflections on life. Often the need arises to talk through thoughts and emotions, while negotiating new possibilities. It is sensible to talk through some stages, while others may be 'body stormed' or performed. Some players may journey through subconscious abysses and darkness and in these cases the mediator may suggest a more playful attitude to the game. The journey, in addition, often connects people by initiating friendships and improvising new ways of communicating amongst themselves.

The Hero's game empowers participants through creative performing arts processes. According to Vähälä (2003), creative making processes draw on the survival skills of the self and personal psychological processes when dealing with changing worlds and environments. Creativity is a continuing stimulating process flowing from previous experiences into new creative processes, while creative arts are acknowledged to be empowering processes from the outset. The strengthening of creative identities, in the case of the Hero's game through performing arts and video making, allows the empowerment of the self while allowing feelings of capability and self-value to flourish. This game, as a research method, utilises the art forms of participatory drama, movie and creative writing.



**Figure 3. Still image from the video titled *Heroes of Kimberley* by Taina Kontio.**

Variations include playing with cards that guide the Hero through unexpected challenges and surprises, both positive and negative. Kontio also integrates drama and life coaching into the game, depending on her audience or the identified problem. The Hero's Journey has successfully been used as a means for individual empowerment, development of career paths or a strategy in case or service design.

The field work teams consisted of designers, community members and staff from the various institutions. Processes, change and the needs of all stakeholders had to be considered for sustainable outcomes. The projects produced additional sets of data from transcribed interviews deriving from group discussions with the participants, video and self- documentation. The flexibility that is needed in art-based participatory methods are enabled through improvisation as it permits consistently designed research processes the required variability to embrace environmental and social turbulences and change (Secchi 2012). Improvisation also enables the needed reflection in action that are required by these research methods (Schon 2001). The Hero's Journey, was repeated with various community groups and participants, allowing participants to act in various roles as the hero, enemies or allies.

The Hero's Journey activity enabled the youth participants to apply personal narratives and embodied performances to process their hardships. The participants were guided by the loose outline of a game activity that encouraged them to experiment, improvise and feel their ways through performative and self-documenting activities to reflect on, process and communicate their dreams, hopes and fears. This empowering activity enabled the identity shaping processes of the participating youth through the potent use of narratives. Thus, narrative and performative self-empowering activities, such as the Hero's Journey, support marginalised participants to reimagine their worlds and engage in social justice. Self-empowerment is illustrated in how the transformative powers of knowledge and art, including performance, writing, storytelling and a video making platform, sustain the participants' activism.

## The GRACE model

With a strong emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches the participating researchers and service designers of the *My Dream World* and *PARTY* projects selected suitable methods for the different contexts and problems they faced. These contexts required from the researchers and service designers an understanding of the main challenges, development topics and institutional issues whilst collaborating with the stakeholders in the field.

The GRACE model is utilising methods that are strongly built on art, creativity and embodiment. This model was developed through the activities employed in the *My Dream World* and *PARTY* projects, including the Hero's Journey, in which data was captured through video, field notes of researchers and writing of the participants.

The GRACE model is constructed around three themes:

*Art and Creativity:* using artistic and creative tools and methods that enable the recognition of personal capabilities and skills, utilising these for creating dialogue with the stakeholders and community. These tools are based on storytelling and visual communication that concretise both the San youth's challenges and the solutions in a communicable format for audiences, the stakeholders and communities. These are the tools for creating dialogue.

*Embodiment / Expression / Empowerment:* using personal skills and capabilities for expressing concerns, opinions, challenges or solutions. These skills enable

taking initiative and becoming proactive members of community, thus creating feelings of accomplishment and agency.

*Grass-root action:* using learning processes that enable youth participants to create dialogue with stakeholders and communities through their capabilities.

Using and enabling the GRACE model strengthens action that can contribute to transformative social justice.

GRACE assists youth participants in a process of empowerment by design (Muratovski 2016a and b), thus responding to the need of self-appreciation through recognition of the skills and talent of youth participants. The model increases youth participant's ability to process and solve problems and challenges. One of the main benefits of the model is that it enables grass-root action for the sharing of participants' voices and opinions within and outside the community, while dialogue with stakeholders is strengthened within the public space (Duncum 2011).

Embodied learning (Shilling 2007; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg 2013) enabled the San youth to process their challenges through theatre, drawing, sewing, drama, performing arts or sports, as these embodied actions employ creativity. Essential planning and collaboration with stakeholders shape activities and outcomes. Through strengthening the existing capabilities with service design training, youth participants are able to create dialogue with stakeholders and surrounding communities.

GRACE is constructed through embodied and informal learning processes of San youth who lack formal learning opportunities. The embodied learning took place through hands-on processes of doing and experiential learning. The learning process were facilitated by PARTY project's consortium members. Learning through different workshops, such as the Hero's Journey and social sculpturing through poster interventions, shape the main element of the model. The process is a step-by-step application of service design methods in which actions are visualised. Consecutive workshops support learning and planning processes that empowers San youth and mitigates further marginalisation.

Challenges and problems were identified by youth participants, while they also shared their messages to future San generations through various workshop activities. The San youth demonstrated their empowerment through processing their challenges via community theatre performances and radio programs instigated by youth participants.

Community theatre was designed as an interactive performance, allowing youth participants to engage in joint performances with their audiences. The GRACE model enables the use of the resources at hand to create engagement and collaboration.

Encouraging the youth to use their creative talent for self-expression and stimulating dialogue was also a goal of the theatre and radio commercial workshop focussed on developing grass-root action. Some learning included script-writing and producing basic visual and audio marketing materials, and interactive performance methods with audiences. An important outcome was youth participants creating audio content, a short commercial about the interactive community performance, for a local radio channel.

The PARTY project Hero's Journey workshop, the Hero was not an individual participant, but the community. The mentor and support figures were constituted by the researchers and stakeholders who carefully guided the community through the three basic stages of separation, initiation and return. In the separation phase the community members identified their ideal situations and envisaged new possibilities. The initiation phase included working through processes of problem solving and exploring solutions, while the return phase channelled the energy, new ideas and solutions back to the communities.

The workshop was organised as follows:

Day 1: Identified challenges through storytelling and poster production

Day 2: Created solution-orientated storylines and community action through posters

Day 3: Identified key messages that were turned into an audio commercial for radio

Day 4: Planned interaction with the audience

Day 5: Action – the performance.

Topics that were integrated into the play were chosen by participating youth. Three teams worked on designing the play, each contributing relevant challenges and solutions. The play was performed through three simultaneous acts. Dissemination and dialogue involved community members who constituted the audience, while the local San radio station broadcasted the participants' commercial. Additionally, the national South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) aired a story about the workshops and youth theatre performance.

## Conclusion

Central to the Hero's Journey is the function of storytelling and empowerment through addressing personal challenges. Thus, decolonisation is deeply embedded in the Hero's game and is used as a powerful tool in development contexts. The Hero's Journey enables Nandy's (1984) ideas of the decolonisation of mind by encouraging players to envisage new possibilities despite local limitations and circumstances. The decolonisation of mind is also illustrated through the outcomes of the PARTY workshops that was based on embodied and improvised participatory art-based activities such as the Hero's Journey.

The PARTY workshops enabled participants with tools that strengthened their capacities. For instance, the radio station workshops have built bridges between radio broadcasting and communities. Youth participants were empowered through basic skills and knowledge gained through interaction with the radio station. Communication was strengthened as further exchanges between stakeholders were discussed. San youth were equipped with tools to voice their opinions and communicate with their communities (theatre play and poster creation), thus empowering them to engage in activism as they envision their future communities.

The digital storytelling workshop changed the emphasis on participants as they were the subjects, instead of the objects, in their digitally documented stories. The films produced are useful tools for development in terms of personal or community development. Learning how to use digital technology to express stories was regarded as significant by San youth as a means of sharing personal stories within their communities. San youth also regarded taking on advocacy roles utilising new skills and knowledge within their own communities, and acting to empower other young people, as positive outcomes.

The Hero's Journey presents a variety of possibilities illustrated through the *My Dream World* and PARTY projects' workshops. These different approaches to the activity, on both individual and group levels, challenge the ways participatory research is designed, performed and documented, thus catalysing new research practices that are underpinned by improvisatory processes. These processes, from Hero's Journey to a local radio project that was designed by marginalised San youth, are exemplary intersections of ethical and transformative interventions that enable activism. The GRACE model is a useful framework for social designers, researchers and community stakeholders to empower the

communities they work with, especially in development contexts. This model has the potential to improve the marginalised conditions of communities globally as illustrated by the San youth of Platfontein in South Africa.

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