Changing the Course of AIDS

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Appendix 2

Methodology

This book draws on some six years of research on company HIV/AIDS programs, which is summarized in Table 2 (see Appendix 1). This appendix details the research most extensively utilized in this book in six large companies.

Chapter 2 and a section of Chapter 5 draw on material collected between 2001 and 2005 in Deco, a company in the petrochemical sector. I started to research Deco’s response to HIV/AIDS in 2001 in an exploratory manner. It was clear that South African companies were going to have to respond to the AIDS epidemic, and the limited corporate response in South Africa at that time indicated that it was likely to become a matter of urgency.

A number of South African companies that I approached in late 2000 were unwilling to provide access, primarily because of the sensitive nature of HIV/AIDS. Access was gained to Deco because, by chance, the company HIV/AIDS manager knew me though unrelated research. On the strength of this, she assisted in the long and complex process of persuading the company to give me research access. Although the research was conducted at
no cost to the company, a nine-page legal agreement was eventually negotiated. Despite the fact that the legal document mimicked the “value-free” language in my research proposal, it was quickly evident that the research process would be used by the company HIV/AIDS manager to motivate a greater response from the company. Over the research period (2001–2005), I developed close working relationships with a number of Deco employees who were attempting to implement HIV/AIDS programs. They were invaluable in helping me understand the dynamics of the company, the motivations of individuals, and, frequently, opening up further research access. I conducted approximately seventy-five interviews with managers, trade unionists, medical personnel, and those individuals who were running HIV/AIDS programs in the company. Critically, in addition to these formal interviews, I attended meetings of the company’s AIDS Forum and various workshops and HIV/AIDS-related events.

The bulk of the book, outside of Chapter 2, draws on two research projects conducted in 2005 and 2006 that specifically focused on peer educators. The first project, conducted between January and November 2005, sought to provide an overview of peer educator activity within five major companies—Autocircle, Autostar, Bestbuyco, Finco, and Mineco. These companies were selected on the basis of having significant peer educator programs, representing different economic sectors, and being willing to grant research access. This research had four major components.

First, in-depth interviews were conducted with 29 “key players” such as managers, occupational health practitioners, trade unionists, and trainers to establish the nature of company HIV/AIDS programs and the role of peer educators within these—or at least what these key players perceived them to be.

Second, a questionnaire was sent to all known peer educators in these companies though the companies’ internal mail systems. Questionnaires were available in English, Isixhosa, Setswana, and Sepedi. In total 614 completed questionnaires were returned; an overall response rate of 35 percent, which ranged widely among individual companies, from 22 to 85 percent, depending on logistical capacity and, probably, the accuracy of estimated numbers of active peer educators.

Third, in-depth interviews were conducted with 75 workplace peer educators (some also acting as local peer educator coordinators) in six of the country’s nine provinces. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted for
approximately one hour. Most were done on an individual basis, but three small-group interviews were conducted with three or four peer educators. Interviews probed what peer educators were actually doing within HIV/AIDS programs and the barriers they faced in this regard, their motivations, their understanding of their own agency and behavioral change, and their views on workplace peer education and its possible future. The selection of peer educators was done at a local level by peer educator coordinators on the basis of a request for active peer educators representing a spectrum of race and gender and, where appropriate, differently sized workplaces and unionized and nonunionized employees. Typically around four peer educators would be interviewed at any one site. Sometimes, these were drawn from a number of smaller sites that had only one or two peer educators, for example, in Finco’s branch operations. The request for a demographic range almost certainly meant an overrepresentation of white peer educators. Though their inclusion in the interview schedules sometimes also appeared to be a matter of presenting “trophy whites” given the general absence of whites from the ranks of peer educators (See Chapters 3 and 4).

The fourth component consisted of a small number of participatory observations. These included a two-day peer training workshop attended by 40 of Finco’s peer educators and two one-day workshops attended by 25 and 120 peer educators, in Autocircle and Bestbuyco, respectively.

Following this research project, I chose to focus on the informal activity of peer educators because it seemed that this was where the most significant, and least understood, activity was taking place. The second project, based in one operation of Mineco where there was an active peer educator group, was conducted between May and September 2006. This project also consisted of four components. First, I attended the monthly meeting of the peer educator group as an observer. Five such meetings were attended. Between meetings, I maintained contact with the coordinator of the group, who provided logistical support, advice, and insights.

Second, the members of this peer educator group were asked to keep a daily diary of their informal activity. This consisted of a brief record of any interactions that occurred that day and a more complete record of one of these interactions. Seven peer educators kept these diaries which began in mid-May and finished at the end of August. An eighth peer educator kept a diary over a number of months, but this was not used because of concerns over its accuracy. Not all seven peer educators submitted complete
Appendix 2

diaries for all of this period—in total 20.5 months of diary entries were submitted. Peer educators were encouraged to indicate “no activity” when this was the case—but this was not always done, leaving uncertainty over blank entries. Peer educators were encouraged to write in the language of their choice. Only one chose to write in a language other than English (Setswana), which was translated. The work of keeping the diaries was recognized from the outset as onerous. By agreement, an honorarium was given, on completion of the project, to each peer educator who kept a research diary. Certificates of participation were awarded to those who kept diaries at the end of the project.

Much of the data contained in the diaries was qualitative in nature, consisting primarily of the peer educators’ own accounts, or narratives, of their activity. Nevertheless, summarizing all interactions that they had each day, specific pieces of data that were requested in the standard diary page, and interpretations made by the researcher when reading the diary entries allowed some statistical data to be collected.

In total the seven peer educators recorded 343 interactions. However, of these entries, 52 recorded formal activity—addressing groups of people with largely prepared information. While most of these 52 reported interactions were at work and fit neatly into the idea of a formal presentation, a small number were in churches or at funerals (and often involving large numbers of people—as many as 300). From some perspectives these community-based interactions are different from the regular formal presentations given to coworkers by peer educators—for example, they often address people at a particular collective moment that itself may be directly linked to HIV/AIDS—at a routine shift or team meeting. Rigorously categorizing between formal and informal activity in this way can be questioned. Nevertheless, in seeking to specifically capture informal activity, this division between formal and informal (rather than work and community setting) was maintained.

By contrast to these 52 formal interactions, 16 interactions were classified as “mixed,” in that formal activity led directly into informal activity with particular individuals from the group addressed. These interactions have been kept in the analysis—with the emphasis on the informal rather than formal component of the interaction.

Of the 286 interactions utilized for the analysis of informal activity (270 informal and 16 mixed), 185 were recorded in depth using a one-page
template, to which additional pages were sometimes added, and 101 noted only location, the form of interaction (usually indicating the number of people involved), length of interaction, and topic discussed. Since interactions could involve more than one topic, a total of 426 topics were categorized by the researcher as forming the content of these 286 interactions.

Third, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight peer educators, of whom six had kept research diaries. Interviews drew on individuals’ diary entries and sought to explore issues raised in these. Interviews with peer educators lasted between one and a half and three hours. Additionally, interviews of approximately one hour’s duration were conducted with two managers, three trade unionists, and a nursing sister based at the site.

Fourth, and finally, I made three site visits to understand the environment in which the peer educators operated. These consisted of the mine hostel, an informal settlement, and the underground working environment.

Ethical permission for both research projects was obtained from the Wits University Human Research Ethics (Non-Medical) Committee: protocol numbers HO50310 and 60602. I strove to act ethically and fairly in my interactions with peer educators and others in the course of this research. I am, however, doubtful whether the “jumping through hoops” that was necessary to comply with the sometimes obscure requests of the ethics committee actually assisted in the practice (rather than formal facade) of acting ethically in often messy fieldwork environments.

Both research projects were written up in the form of research reports (Dickinson 2006a and 2007). Additionally, I made a number of presentations and wrote two journal articles (Dickinson 2006b, 2006c) based on the first research project. A sabbatical period that provided an extended period for reflection and reading enabled me to move beyond these formats and to think more deeply about what peer educators were doing—as this book attempts to describe.

My thinking, and the thesis put forward in this book, has also been framed by ten years of extensive contact with friends and acquaintances in Katlehong, a large township to the southeast of Johannesburg, and a two-month stay in a Free State township during 2007. Without my own informal activity in township communities (albeit of a very different nature to that I describe peer educators conducting in this book), it would have been much harder to understand what peer educators were telling me.