

# The UKZN Griot

...of Trash and Garbology



Keyan G Tomaselli\*

Here is a letter I once wrote to the administration:

Dear Colleague

Since I wrote the letter below another four weeks of archaeological detritus has layered some areas of the MTB courtyard. CCMS is thinking of introducing a new module on the significance of trash in the postmodern era. The MTB courtyard near the ramp, with its not so random distribution of cans, wrappers, cigarette butts etc, will form the perfect arena for student practicals. By the time we've secured SAQA approval for this very important proposed module in postmodern detritus archaeology (or garbology), another 18 months of trash will have accumulated and, apart from the single MA student currently studying the behavioural/ marketing/cultural/social causes of why UKZN staff and students routinely break the law in their smoking behaviour at the noisy coffee shop, so too I can put together a team of top Honours students to study trash, the students who litter the courtyard and the implications for UKZN's public image (marketing, PR, reputation etc).

"Trash, Trivia and Tracking (of the perpetrators)", will be the title of the project. The junk will be categorised according to whether or not it is recyclable, by product, brand, hard or soft, biodegradability, and mapped with a GPS. Spatial network analysis will be applied involving the UKZN Geography programme, and strategic research funds will be sourced from the College Research Office. CCMS has lots of expertise in the cultural mapping of trash, especially by one of our post-docs who is developing a new approach based on a series of field trips led by a real Archaeologist who knows the symbolic value of trash as it accumulates historically. He uses GIS and cellphone technology and he then teaches our students the method. This is also known as teaching by means of bricolage.

This kind of sexiness really grabs contemporary students who think that the Kardashians have something positive to offer the world. NRF funding will be secured and the SAPSE accredited publications that will appear will earn us further research incentives. In homage, we'll then scatter the published papers all over the courtyard to make the point that trash is not only tried and tested (i.e. peer-reviewed) but that it is also good for the soil, good for the soul and good for UKZN's public image. They'll be good for Howard College's feral cats also, as cats just love sitting on paper. At least, my cat always sits on my newspaper when I am trying to read it. I could bring her onto campus to train the ferals if need be.

Since no-one seems to know who is responsible for regularly clearing up the courtyard mess the next best thing is to use it as a laboratory. The following disciplines might be also open to using this new lab that costs the University nothing at all: Environmental studies; Policing studies (or lack of it – Criminology); Classics (trash as residue), Marketing (branding), Health (smoking) and so on.

And so it goes...

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No one from the University responded, but I did get a response from the Archaeologist:

'I've just sat through a workshop on reviewing the Master Plan for Tourism in which many platitudes were bandied about concerning do's and don'ts in tourism marketing etc, one of them being not littering the approaches to one's town or having it line the road to one's heritage attraction. You know only too well the situation ... So, in the spirit of 'extreme culture', I was musing on making the litter one of the attractions - *inter alia* by doing some garbology on it (William Rathje's term for the archaeology of contemporary trash) and marketing the results! And then your email arrived...

(One of the results we've already remarked on from looking at what's beside the (name of town) road is that drinking and driving is pretty much standard behaviour - a future archaeologist might conclude it was legal!).

All the best.'

\* \* \*

And so it goes.

I've witnessed lecturers asking students if they would discard sweet wrappers and all manner of junk on the floor in their homes, and what their mothers would think of this behaviour. The problem is that students think that someone else is employed to clean up after them. The cleaners are already over-stretched, under-respected and working less hours as UKZN tries to balance its budget. We really do need to take into account the cleaners' working conditions and not create unnecessary work for them. That requires consideration, a value that is often in short supply at UKZN.

In one of the men's rooms in MTB some students (who are never caught in the act) engage in nesting behaviour. They unravel long lengths of toilet paper and then carefully arrange them on the floor in the corners of the lavatory stalls or spread bits across the room. No-one knows who is doing this, why it is being done, or what is intended. This would be a job for the Psychology Department. Nesting Behaviour as a Means to Reducing Stress 101, perhaps? Or Compulsive Behaviour and the Aesthetics of Littering? Go figure.

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Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of the Centre for Communication, Media and Society. Once in 1968 when he and some student friends got lost late at night in Fish Hoek, they took a side road and camped. They woke up the next morning with the bewildered locals observing them sleeping on their rubbish dump. They had wondered about the smell.

*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.*

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