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## **Digital Methodologies for Analysing and Disseminating Community Research. (A reflection on practice by the artist/researcher)**

**Keywords:** methodology, co-creation, collaboration, multimodality, community research, community building, digital platforms/tools, creative practices, storytelling, healing, societal issues, COVID 19.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has made me further address the value that artistic practice can have on our mental and psychological health and its significance in community healing. According to Gloster AT. et al. the main impact of the virus was uncertainty and of the lockdowns were stress, depression, affect and wellbeing (2020, p. 3). COVID 19 has affected our mental health, raising feelings of uncertainty, isolation, hopelessness, fear, and anxiety; it has challenged us to change our lifestyles and rebalance our commitments to work, family, education, and recreation. This global disaster has also hit people from disadvantaged backgrounds much harder, particularly those in challenging financial situations; suffering from pre-existing health conditions or living with violent and abusive partners. It has shown us just how imbalanced our societies are, in terms of race and gender for example. Online platforms have taken a major role serving to make this situation more bearable. We are learning to do what we did before, at a distance and in some cases even in isolation.

As an artist and researcher in creative practices, I have, for a while now, used such online platforms to create spaces to share personal stories. I have been able to connect narratives to bring up issues of power, territory, displacement, personal and historical memory, gender, and violence. The COVID pandemic has forced us to live, work, socialise at a distance using such digital platforms and it has highlighted the importance of finding ways to engage global communities to share their healing stories, even if it is done in isolation and at a distance, through electronic literature and art.

Consequently, in this paper I would like to explore the use of methodologies and digital tools which can help to conduct and disseminate interdisciplinary research projects alongside artists and communities. I have experience of working in community groups in galleries, museums and schools, and my research and practice draws from these. However, the two projects discussed in this paper, *Invisible Voices* and *Share to Heal* workshop, are more focused on societal issues which occurred due to specific social or political circumstances of a period in time. They address questions in connection to community histories; the value that creative storytelling and artistic approaches can have in sharing personal stories; and the value of working directly with participants. The paper also highlights the impact these projects can have not only to these specific communities, but also to society in general.

## Project One - Invisible Voices: Women Victims of the Colombian Conflict

The first case study in this context is titled *Invisible Voices: Women Victims of the Colombian Conflict*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) of England<sup>1</sup> and addresses the issue of the representation of the conflict and victims in Colombia's 60-year-long conflict.

We have been aware of the use of the Internet as a medium and as a platform for communication and dissemination for a long time now. In the early 1990's many artists took advantages of this medium to produce work outside the confinements of the gallery and even geographical and national barriers with works of "netart"<sup>2</sup>.

Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, in their condensed and comprehensive book *New Media Art*, look at art practices in the age of digital communication and distribution. They present examples representative of how artists have always engaged with emerging media technologies (the Internet one of them) as it made a global movement of Art, to explore cultural, social and aesthetics possibilities. This global characteristic is now a leading aspect in the way we experience the everyday in connection to the use of online platforms for more creative practices.

Tribe and Jana (2006, p. 6) highlight how the Internet has meant different things for different people, whether a way to get rich, a place for political grassroots, a place for publishing, for distributing information and for advertising. As they mention, as early as 1994, new terms started to appear such as web, the net, cyberspace and <dot com.> which now are so familiar. It was around this time that the first commercial web browsers enabled everyone to become a digital artist and made the World Wide Web a source of inspiration and dissemination.

Up till now artists have used the Internet as a medium and a way to create and distribute digital art-literature. However, separation between the medium and the artist still existed, the physical and the virtual spaces were still apparent and although virtual reality has brought them closer, it is arguably only through the current global pandemic, that media-technologies have become engrained in our lives, accentuating our dependence on online communication. The way we experience our everyday life, communicate, interact, and understand the social, the cultural, the self, through the digital medium, has changed.

In this age of pandemic, separation and isolation geographical boundaries have become closer through online platforms. Poignant issues of neglect from many governments in tackling COVID 19 make it even more imperative to think of new ways to build applications where users can share personal stories, concerns, mental health problems, challenges or social issues through narrative methods and media art practices. We need to connect the

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<sup>1</sup> It was undertaken in conjunction with an interdisciplinary team of experts working in different fields of research: Modern Languages, Media Arts, Computer Sciences and Human Rights Law. See website: <https://www.voces-invisibles.com/> (Accessed 12/05/2021)

<sup>2</sup> net.art also known as Internet art due to the use of the Internet as its medium and place from which to draw material to create artwork.

community of electronic literature-art with such communities in our new local-globalised spaces with the primary aim of healing.

## Community Research

This interest in building communities and sharing stories had already started to emerge from my art and came into realisation through my artistic practice-based research project *The Winnipeg: The Poem that Crossed the Atlantic*, where (through digital humanities research and the use of digital methodologies) international communities came together to heal. Issues of cultural identity, heritage, memory, homeland, migration, exile, refugees, disaggregation, and displacement were addressed. And, more recently through the project *Invisible Voices* created alongside a community of women who have suffered violence and trauma.

*Invisible Voices: Women Victims of the Colombian Conflict* is a practice-based research project part of the bigger research investigation *Memory, Victims, and Representation of the Colombian Conflict*<sup>3</sup>. Above all, it focuses on exploring and incentivising new means of awareness with regards to the self-representation of women victims of the Colombian conflict through different creative practices.

We invited members of the Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres<sup>4</sup> with women from across Colombia, and from the corporation of Zoscua in Boyacá<sup>5</sup>; to take part in a week of co-creation workshops in Bogota, to discuss through storytelling and creative practices, their experience as victims of the Colombian armed conflict. As co-investigator, my role was leading the workshops with the aim to collect materials to create a documentary website and create an online digital artwork.

The aim of the workshops was to give voice to the women victims who were participating and construct a collective memory, a memory where they felt represented. It involved collecting materials for the website, an interactive digital artwork and producing suggestions for alternative forms of representation of victimhood which are victim-centric, primarily through storytelling and the digital art.

The digital art explored the potential of digital technologies through multimodality, non-linear representations, non-classic narratives and in a way the women could understand and interact with their different literacies. I posed a series of research enquires starting with

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/research-themes/transforming-conflict/representation-of-colombian-conflict/>

<sup>4</sup> La Ruta Pacifica is a feminist movement with national political action, which works for the negotiated processing of the armed conflict in Colombia and to make visible the impact of the war on the lives and bodies of women; it is pacifist, antimilitarist and builder of an ethic of nonviolence in which justice, peace, equity, autonomy, freedom and the recognition of otherness are fundamental principles. Source: <https://rutapacifico.org.co/wp/quienes-somos/> (Accessed 9/05/2021)

<sup>5</sup> The Corporation of Zoscua is based in the city of Tunja, in Boyacá, Colombia. It contributes to the construction of democracy based on social justice and works for the strengthening and consolidation of democratic forms of civic and social participation, with the goal to improve the living conditions of their communities. See <http://zoscua.blogspot.com/> (Accessed 9/05/2021)

how digital technologies could help to make visible the voices of the women victims; I explored the opportunities co-creative practices could provide as methodology for collaboration between artist and community with the aim of making the participants agents of change, as well as a co-creation as a method for healing through sharing. I explored how hybrid artistic practices including physical/analogue and digital could facilitate new forms of audio-visual representations.

Our documentary website resulted in a detailed research project which allowed its participants to voice their experience through a clear set of goals and research questions; to showreel the creative process of the workshops, methods, participation, and media used; and to thereby create a work of digital art which also allowed for the addition of comments in the mobile application.

### **Physical: Face to Face Workshops**

To find more tailored methods designed in response to this specific context, I liaised with the Colombian local impact coordinator who had already worked with some of the women and were happy to contribute to this mixed-media and multimodal production. She interviewed them before I designed the workshops and this helped me to understand how I could interact with them - largely through asking the right questions in a manner they would find them relevant to their experiences. It was important that these documents were written for the lay person to understand the work's aim and scope, as well as their significance as agents of change. The participants needed to be aware that the sessions would be recorded, and that these recordings will constitute a significant part of the final artwork (they were all, of course, anonymised).

Integral to the nature of this work was to provide a transparent approach to create a safe environment and to build trust. Thus, the next step was to involve the research group in discussions to provide women with a programme of activities for them to choose from. This was important due to the mixed-abilities and literacies among the group.

This method of co-creation was a significant part of the process because it allowed the women to become more investing in the study; instead of being passive providers of information to be used by an artist, they took an active role in deciding how they wanted their stories to be told. Within this space of cocreation, we worked with life-stories and story-based communication, as Hardy, Sumner and Lambert have significantly used in their storytelling practice; as well as explored creative approaches and processes, individual and in group using multimodal communication through visual, audio, writing and performance practices. The participants were encouraged to bring materials and through user generated processes we gathered photographic material; also, the artworks women created in the workshops in the form of audio, visual and written materials became part of both the artwork and the website.

### **Why storytelling?**

In this paper I have highlighted the value of personal stories for learning and awareness. Joe Lambert has been working extensively with the practice of digital storytelling, he founded

the Centre for Digital Storytelling (now StoryCentre) in 1994 and he is the author of *Seven Stages: Story and the Human Experience*. The StoryCentre's document on 'Storytelling Program Impacts' describes how over the last 20 years, health, education, academia and community have welcomed storytelling and participatory media production methods to share life experience narratives through the production of filmmaking narratives.

They are interested in the first-person voice, the process, participation, and the multimedia production. StoryCentre has a range of methods which they identify under the umbrella of StoryWork. They write 'We work closely with workshop participants to ensure that the social and political determinants of individual "experience" are brought out, in their stories' (Storycentre, Storytelling Program Impacts, p. 2) From the studies they have carried out, they believe that using storytelling to express sensitive topics that might have stigmas such as discrimination, victimisation or mental health issues, help to contextualise the issue or problem and this is where change happens. I can recognise this identification process in *Invisible Voices* where for instance, the women felt unheard and by being able to identify their lack of representation in the Colombian conflict and find ways to make their voice heard, it made a difference to them and gave them more strength to fight for their beliefs and determination to change society.

Storycentre's principles highlight the following:

Sharing stories can lead to positive change. Personal narratives can touch viewers deeply, moving them to reflect on their own experiences, modify their behaviour, treat others with greater compassion, speak out about injustice, and become involved in civic and political life. Whether online, via social media, in local communities, or at the institutional/policy level, the sharing of stories has the power to make a real difference. (Storycentre, Core Principles, p. 3)

Women taking part in *Invisible Voices* were highly active about their rights and political life and spoke candidly, as well as, with passion, anger and pain about the injustice they and other women had suffered during the Colombian armed conflict. In their feedback they identified as one of their goals, to make a 'real difference', this is why they like to take part in workshops to help other women, get strength and continue their fight for those they love and for a change in society in general (later in the paper I have added some of their feedback comments received once the project was published and exhibited online).

Other areas where storytelling is being used very successfully is in healthcare. Pip Hardy and Tony Sumner in their book *Cultivating Compassion: How Digital Storytelling is Transforming Healthcare* explore how storytelling, as a reflective process, can cause a change in health and mental issues.

In their preface they write:

Powerful personal stories promote reflection, prompt discussion and debate, highlight opportunities for learning and improvement, encourage the cultivation of empathy and compassion, and remind all those engaged in the business of healthcare of our shared humanity. (Hardy & Sumner, 2018, p. XVIII)

Again, the above is resonant with *Invisible Voices*. We started the co-creation workshops with an activity where women were invited to bring an object and express their experiences of the Colombian conflict through this object. This exercise provoked extremely personal testimonies loaded with overwhelming emotion and felt with empathy and group discussions from which to learn and reflect. Women found sharing these first-person stories and collaborative creative projects, helped them to heal, increased their self-esteem, made them feel more empowered and that they were taking part in Colombia's historical memory.

### **Digital Spaces: Website, Digital Art, App**

The digital outcomes of this project as above mentioned, consist of a documentary website, digital artwork and a mobile application used to collect stories.

The website follows the research process through slide shows with photographs of the workshops, installations, audio stories generated from the objects the participants were invited to bring as a starting point. This created powerful stories which can be heard in Spanish (with and English translation in a pdf), with titles such as *Proud of Being Black*, *When I was 11 Years Old*, *Heal and Save*, *Signification of the Bandana*, *My Little Children*, *Deep Pain*, *Will carry on Fighting*, *Accept I Was a Victim*, *Displacement and Lost Son*; as well as videos documenting the process of the workshops with titles including *Let Me Refresh Your Memory*, *Threading Memories*, *Listen to Us!*, *Their Place Within Memory*, *Our Bodies Were Left in Threads* and *A Museum for Me*.

The interactive digital art consists of three parts:

1. *Their Place Within Memory*, reflecting the memory space, personal and collective memory, represented by the activity in the Writing on the Wall.
2. *Do You Hear Us?* This represents the political activist space with photographs of events organized by the women.
3. *Voices Constructing Memory* has a variety of narrations gathered from the workshop with themes including participation in political activism and culture, issues of power, territory, displacement, violence, and gender representation such as *A Museum for Me*; body politics with *Our Body was Left in Shreds*; historical and personal memory: *I Refresh your Memory*, *Writing on the Wall*, and *Threading Memories*.

In addition, the two engineers, fellow co-investigators Dr. Claudia Liliana Zúñiga-Cañón from Universidad Santiago de Cali, Colombia and Dr. Rafael Asorey-Cacheda from the Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena, Spain, together with students from the Universidad Santiago de Cali, developed a mobile application or App, called *Mujeres Voces Invisibles del Conflicto (MVIC)*.

Through the use of this App, women can share their stories in writing, orally or through video, during and after the workshops following an anonymous system. As registration is by invitation and only verified users, it always guarantees anonymity and all the testimonials are confidential with texts, audios, and videos stored in encrypted form. No personal data or metadata is stored. Only the author and the creators of the work can access its contents. It

was also encrypted, making the theft of useful information impossible. Any user of the platform can delete their testimonials and account at any time and the deletion is permanent. Both the App and the artwork are accessible through the menu in the documentary website.

### **Impact: Art Practices as a Healing Methodology**

These digital outputs from this project have helped to analyse and disseminate community research in a multimodal way making it accessible for a variety of readers. Most importantly the digital stories seem to have been of great help for this particular community.

Documenting what this group of women did in the workshops and having the stories published and exhibited online, has allowed them ownership and control over their work and they now see themselves represented.

In the feedback questionnaire, in the question about the final online project where we asked what they thought about the final product in general and if they wanted to make any other contributions. These were the answers:

I found it very beautiful and interesting, it moved me to see my fellow participants again, to listen to our voices, to see the museums, the map, everything is wonderful, but above all the emotion and joy of seeing your work of art come to life, and I say my work of art because I feel it that way. More than a contribution I have a request that this does not end here, that you continue with this task of constructing memory in an artistic way, that contributes to a symbolic and restorative reparation. I would also like to be present when the people who contributed to this project get to see it.

‘A wonderful work, I hope its visibility makes an impact and that all of Colombia realises that the conflict is national, and that no one can take for granted that something like this won't happen to them’.

‘That it continues to be replicated and that it be one more tool for women victims to continue their healing’.

The result in general for me is gratifying because I met many people that I never, ever, thought I would get to know. Being there sharing with everyone and knowing that there are other people who are looking for us to tell our stories is very comforting; the best thing that could have happened to me was to join Zozcuca because along the way I have been able to strengthen myself and continue my struggle to discover the truth, and I see many of these feelings reflected in the results of the project.

‘My suggestion would be to continue the project to learn more and give more of oneself.’

The digital publication clearly has added to their experience as creators of the work by seeing it represented online and the co-creation methodology has functioned as a great participatory exercise to empower these women and heal by sharing.

Worth highlighting is a question we asked about their experience of the benefits of taking part in such artistic activities (sound, weaving, drawing, creating plaster models, photographs, and video); and sharing their experiences through the production of art practices to transform feelings of pain and grief. These are some of their answers:

‘Yes. Because by activating and communicating with all the senses the healing aspect is more intense and accurate.’

‘Of course, they are important, and they help because the victims realize in these encounters that there are many families who experience similar tragedies, and this helps to generate catharsis.’

‘It seems to me to be a lovely project, for example when we were doing the hands, the weaving of the sack and the map we all got together, and we were waiting to do those activities and there I managed to capture my feelings of pain and understand that I was not alone and that it was worth continuing.’

‘Healing, a feeling of being accepted, when someone's testimony is followed up with hugs and words of encouragement.’

Of course, because art is transformative and in this way we can tell or relive our stories in a less painful way, with a purpose, and that purpose is to contribute to non-repetition. With these activities we construct not only individual memory but also collective memory that strengthens us and allows us to dream of a better country.

‘It was painful and at the same time good because it brings out everything one has inside.’

Finally, I pose the question, why should we work with such participants? I believe part of the answer is in understanding what needed to be changed and to make them part of this change. In this case, we were able to see the Colombian conflict from their unique perspective. In this project, the impact of the work in the participants is right at the centre and for the artist and researchers it was overwhelming and satisfying but also humbling to see that the project was able to so positively touch these peoples’ lives.

The second case study for analysis, is the workshop *Share to Heal; Creative Digital Practices: Community Platform for Healing and Visualisation* which is still yet to happen at the online ELO 2021 *platform (post?) pandemic* conference and festival, in collaboration with Vinicius Marquet. It will focus on the questions about whether the digital can transform research-community work and facilitate healing through story sharing. We have created an online Community Platform Prototype to share stories, which we will make use of at the conference.

## **Project Two - Share to Heal Workshop; Creative Digital Practices: Community Platform for Healing and Visualisation**

The aim of this workshop is to make visible — through sharing — social, personal, or collective issues/challenges which had become more apparent during the Covid 19 global pandemic of 2020/2021 and to create meaningful conversations through the production of creative digital proposals to heal them. The issues work as an inspiration for creative practice.

Based on the global pandemic, the above creative projects and Marquet's experience of the workshop as a methodology for creativity and exchange of ideas and building on a common interest in a community-based goal, we have put together an online platform for sharing and exchanging stories.

We will use digital methodologies of collaboration and mapping to highlight the main concerns of the community taking part in this discussion. Visualising is also an aim, which we might have to look at later, after realising the workshop. Thus, for this purpose, we have already provided the participants with an online platform where they will be able to share a personal or collective issue/ challenge in connection to the pandemic. The shared stories will be distributed amongst the participants - through the *Share to Heal* platform- the participants will have to find inspiration in the issues to find a way to heal them by coming up with a creative digital proposal (all anonymised).

The only prerequisite is for the participants to have the story ready in advance. We want them to have time to think about the story and bring something relevant to their experience of the pandemic. They should be able to write their own personal story or copy-paste a text from a newspaper depending on personal preference using no more than 250 words or 1500 characters. To save time, this input needs to be digitally available at the beginning of the workshop.

During the production of the *Share to Heal* platform, the questions we initially addressed were related to the design and programming needed to implement the exchanging of stories and their mapping against the digital projects suggested by the participants. As with the previous project we are addressing the opportunities co-creative methodologies provide for collaboration between artists and community. To highlight the main concerns of the community taking part in this discussion we have a keyword section which will be visualised in an upcoming platform so the issues covered in each particular workshop can be seen at a glance.

### **Creative Digital Proposals to Heal**

As previously mentioned, this is the second step of the workshop where the participants are allocated an inspirational story to heal through the creation of a digital media project. Participants can use interdisciplinary, collaborative and/or co-creative methodologies and the proposals can suggest any modality: aural, visual, written or any digital media genre, that is; animation, illustration generative, interactive, networked, narrative, performative, immersive VR AR, locative.

The workshop as research methodology following Rikke Ørngree's model will also be studied to analyse the creative approaches and processes, individual and in group.

### **Experiences Gained**

This can be an area for discussion at the conference presentation. What experiences have we all gained? Who benefits from the stories? Does digital storytelling work as a healing process?

From *Invisible Voices* the learning experience benefited both the facilitators and the women. They communicated to us that they didn't feel "revictimized", on the contrary, they felt that sharing the pain and transform it into something beautiful for people to see was very gratifying. They felt they have been heard, they were not alone, they were empowered with the creation of this work and authorship. Their feelings changed, felt stronger. They became the voices of those other women who have no voices. In particular, they liked these methodologies as it wasn't just purely about their individual stories but was also about creating something out of their experiences. Thus, using not only aural storytelling as life-stories but the fact they had to create artwork seemed to have empowered them more.

For the investigators this was a learning experience like no other. The method was to listen, to hear from these women. We were there as facilitators. We learnt about the Colombian conflict from their experience, their resilience to pain, their power to carry on fighting against injustice, their camaraderie and support for each other. As an artist I have never felt so humble and for me, this has been a project not only of great importance but with a wider social significance.

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