Inclusivity and aesth/ethics in third participatory a/r/tographic spaces

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Abstract

In this article, my a/r/tographic practice explores the complexity and uncertainty of educational situations in a third pedagogical space for inclusivity through the creation of a comic story. I draw, narrate, and reflect on a situation during a participatory audiovisual project with nine young people (9-15 years old), where a learning proposal leads to different unexpected results in three participants with learning disabilities. This experience invites me to reflect on the extent to which the creation of participatory audiovisual narratives in third pedagogical spaces can lead to inclusivity. To explore this issue, I fist question the idea of third spaces of learning as places for democracy and transformation for inclusivity, free from power relationships. Furthermore, I propose complexity and acceptation of constraints as a path of unexpected transformation. Finally, I conclude situating "aesth/ethics" in a/rtography, and proposing the contiguity of image and text in comic narratives as an inclusive means committed with consent, capacity, and confidentiality.

Key words: inclusivity, a/r/tography, third pedagogical sites, participatory video, ethics, aesthetics.

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A/r/tographic practice in context

"Being engaged in a/r/tography is about being committed to an ongoing inquiry through art-making and writing, not separate or descriptive of one another but rather working together to create new understandings."

Leggo et al., 2011: 240

A/r/tography is a practice-based methodology of situations (Triggs, Irwin and O'Donoghue 2012), where the three identities of the artist, researcher and teacher coexist contiguously (Irwin and Springgay 2008: xxviii) as a form of living inquiry (Irwin and de Cosson 2004) in radical relatedness with others (Bickel et al. 2011). My earlier a/r/tographic practice with communities of children and youth has led me to explore the tensions and contradictions between the identities of the artist, researcher and teacher (Madrid 2012). In this article, my living inquiry takes the form of a comic story as an autobiographical relational narration that reflects upon the complexity and uncertainty of educational situations that aim to be inclusive.

The graphic narration shows a sequence of situations that took place during an annual art workshop in an association outside of school hours. The ADERES Association (Asociación por el Desarrollo de las Relaciones Sociales/ Association for the Development of Social Relationships) in Granada, Spain, offers creative inclusive spaces for children and young people with a diversity of cognitive and social difficulties with the aim of inclusivity. Most of the participants are receiving therapy with some of the professional psychologists that work at the association, who in turn are in coordination with the facilitators of creative activities. While my role as a facilitator of the art workshop pays attention to participants' therapeutic processes, my responsibility is constricted to art education.

As an art educator, I have collaborated with the professional animator Miguel López to facilitate the creation of a cut-out animated film with the participants of the Association. To reflect on this process, it is very helpful to consider participatory video concerns about community work towards empowerment and emancipation. Participatory video has been defined as a process where people acquire technical and organizational knowledge to control the content of video production through which people are empowered with the confidence, skills, and information they need to tackle their own issues (Shawn and Robertson 1997: 26).

The short animated film project to create had the aim to explore what an ideal day would be like for participants. The group of participants was formed by nine young people (11-15 years old) with several learning disabilities and cognitive difficulties such as dyslexia, psychic disorganization, psychosis and other intellectual disabilities. The art workshop took place during one-hour weekly session in ADERES (Granada, Spain), during the school year (September 2010- June 2011); it also included the voluntary collaboration of Lucía Suárez, a psychology student. This paper reflects on some of the questions that motivate my PhD: To what extent can the creation of participatory audiovisual narratives be a means to inclusivity in third pedagogical spaces?

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Third pedagogical spaces: democratic places of transformation and inclusivity?

"Third pedagogical sites are distinguished by fluidity and permeability which allow the boundaries of the world of professional artmaking to blur with that of conventional schooling (…) The professional-like working environment, complete with professional expectations, identities, and histories, serves both as a support and as constraints that enable, thereby providing a transformational experience for students."

Castro and Grauer (2010: 16-17)

To explore the degree to which the creation of participatory audiovisual narratives can increase levels of inclusivity, I focus on the potential of after-school third pedagogical spaces to enhance participation. Community youth after-school projects are considered to be more inclusive, holistic, and democratic than more traditional, compulsory educational environments.

Formal teaching might suffer the pressure to integrate ordered sequences that follow traditional perspectives and which demand certainty, similarity and normalization. Some scholars suggest that youth media organizations might be free from this pressure (Goodman, 2003); furthermore, they may function as democratic places of communication, collaboration and collective problem solving (Castro and Grauer 2010: 15). For Goodman (2003: 102), some after-school programs might include a more holistic approach "that addresses the social, emotional, creative, and cognitive needs of teenagers", with more flexibility and freedom than schools. Programs that see the importance of giving teenagers real responsibilities and real-world work might enhance levels of youth civic engagement in their communities (Goodman, 2003: 104).

Community media youth programs that occur after school have been called third pedagogical spaces. Wilson (2008: 120) describes third pedagogical sites as transforming

spaces where new forms of hybrid visual cultural artifacts, production and meaning arise through informal contacts between children and adults. J. C Castro and K. Grauer (2010: 17) point to the fluidity and permeability of third pedagogical sites; these spaces blur the boundaries between the professional artmaking world and schooling when there is a professional-like working environment with equally professional expectations.

There are four aspects about a/r/tographic audiovisual projects developed in third pedagogical spaces for inclusivity that I would like to question. First, I find professional expectations problematic, if not incompatible, with inclusivity. If we have high expectations for the outcome of an artistic project, we might not be able to pay the attention to the complexity of the process, or to participants' needs. In this respect, a/r/tography stresses the relevance of the process of practice and its potential (Triggs et al. in press). Professional expectations might be incompatible with being present, listening carefully to the complexities of situations and attending to differences. Furthermore, professional expectations might lead facilitators or mentors to more readily support aesthetic decisions that follow the direction of mainstream audiovisual languages in order to guarantee high quality results. This orientation might constrict participants' freedom to express themselves in their own way since they must adjust their representations to aesthetic canons of quality and professionalism.

A second consideration is that third pedagogical spaces could, perhaps, be romanticized in terms of democratic ideals, empowerment and power relationships. These third spaces might not be exempt from power relationships operating form the different expectations and aims of participants, facilitators or mentors, and institutional purposes. The relationships between facilitators, participants and institutions could be explored critically by a/r/tographers in order to acknowledge real tensions in the creative educational process. Furthermore, it is interesting to question the discourse of empowerment and describe the conditions under which empowerment may or not be possible. In addition, in order to enhance

inclusivity, it might be necessary to address the difficulty of dealing with constraints and limits. Furthermore, a/r/tographers might need to come to terms with our own capacity constraints to presence situations, listen carefully and accept complexity as a path to transformation.

Finally, I engage in arts-based inquiry to create aesth/ethics means of representation in projects done with people with difficulties and disabilities in an effort to address power relationships and to investigate the complex processes of inclusivity. In order to do this, I explore the potential of the contiguity of image and text.

Inclusivity and democracy: presencing complexity.

"Yet under the pressure of having to work together to fully conceptualize, script, act, shoot, edit, and produce a short film, students are learning how to collaborate, compromise, and communicate. These are the foundations of what it means to live in a democratic society." Castro and Grauer (2010: 15)

Inclusivity and democratic ideals are central issues in education and could be seen as core elements of pedagogy in democratic societies. Similarly, a/r/tography is interested in facilitating social justice (Irwin 2008: 72). As Castro and Grauer (2010:15) indicate, collaboration, commitment, communication, and group problem-solving are common elements in collective media projects and are foundational ideas for democracy. However, the path to inclusivity from democratic foundations requires us to reflect upon the purpose of these common elements and to considering participant's capacities and needs. Otherwise, our democratic inclusive ideals might obey what Michalko identifies as the interest to make disabled people fit into hegemonic productive societies where disabilities are considered a misfortune; "a useless unworthy difference that generates the meaningless of useless – suffering and the ethic requirement to remedy it" (2002: 99). From this consideration, it might be necessary to define what we understand as democracy and identify power relationships in

democratic contexts and practices, such as a/r/tographic practice. No practice or context is completely free from power relationships, interests, or ideologies. In this direction, a/r/tography acknowledges that "relationships are not free of tensions" (Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong and Bickel, 2008: 208).

Inclusivity is mainly understood as a process concerned with the identification and elimination of barriers that enhances the presence, participation and academic achievement of every student, integrating those with more risk of being excluded or suffering school failure (UNESCO, 2005). Nevertheless, this perspective might overvalue participation for academic achievement, and might overlook the relevance of relationality (Bickel, Springgay, Beer, Irwin, Grauer and Xiong, 2011), this is, human relations and its complexity.

A/r/tographers have the privilege and the challenge to work through the relationship of the three different identities of the artist, the researcher and the teacher (Irwin and Springgay, 2008). The challenge might start with the acknowledgment of the different ideals and interests of these identities, which requires a/r/tographers to be very aware of their inner tensions and contradictions. As I reflect on the comic story, the artist, researcher and teacher might have different feelings about a situation and might approach it in different ways. These differences require a/r/tographers to observe themselves in the complexity of relational situations in education in order to "presence a space of emergence" (Gunnlaugson 2011: 2).

Presencing is one field of conversation in pedagogical relationships in which we can sense collectively and intuit "not yet embodied or known possibilities" (Gunnlaugson, 2011: 3). Presencing involves the experience of interconnectedness with the group; it is about paying attention to the moment to moment unfolding knowledge in conversation with an emerging potential of the unpredictable. O. Gunnlaugson (2011:1) understands presencing as a process-method of generative conversation that involves sensing, seeing into and apprehending complex emergent ways of knowing and inquiry within collective contexts of

learning and inquiry. Furthermore, presencing is a state where change happens in a level that touches the self in the very centre, and includes the person and his/her attitudes, values, and habits. The capacity to presence can be considered a means to reflexivity. The process of reflexivity and presencing engages us and involves "attending more closely to one's own interiority and the shared field"; it invites us to think emergently with others and re-center ourselves as co-emergent participatory facets of a group (Gunnlaugson 2011: 4-7).

A/r/tographers are co-emergent participatory facets of the art, research and learning that take place in the collective and individual experience of the group. As I mentioned previously, it is necessary to reflect on the purpose of the creative process of collaboration, commitment, communication, and collective problem-solving, and the influences of the artist, researcher and teacher that lead our practice. From this consideration, when a/r/tographers work with young people with cognitive difficulties, professional expectations could be questioned as a constraining factor that might inhibit presencing and the emergence of the new. In relation to this, Capstick (2012: 270) stresses that it is necessary to make adaptations to the process of participatory video so that we allow each person to take part on his or her own terms. As we see in the story, how to embrace complexity and difference in pedagogical relationships is a central issue in collective creational processes.

Power relationships and empowerment in third pedagogical spaces

"*Researchers no longer need to seek to give voice to others, to empower others, to emancipate others, to refer to others as subjugated voices. Instead they are able to listen to and participate with those traditionally 'othered' as constructor of meaning of their own experiences and agents of knowledge.*"

Bishop, 2005: 123

The aim to empower others might assume that researchers have the power to bring social change and transformation in a predetermined and desired direction. However, reality is

complex and uncertain, and this means the result or outcome of a sequence of human and non-human interactions cannot be calculated or known in advance. Moreover, as Bishop (2005) states, researchers need to learn to listen and participate as constructors of meanings with others in a humble position that requires presence and openness to the emergence of the unexpected. Living with others and listening to the present is a type relationality that invites a/r/tographers to a certain reflexivity that is conscious of power relationships.

Empowerment can also be understood as the potential of transformation. For High et al. (2012; 40), "empowerment can occur where there is time and space for individuals to learn to be different." This potential of becoming different does not necessarily correspond with a previous program or set of ideas; it can be the consequence of presencing the educational situation, listening carefully and accepting reality with its limits. Furthermore, the potential of becoming different might be preceded by the unconditional acceptation of how we are and how others are. Acceptation is a path to love. Authors such as Paulo Freire, Carl Leggo, and brooks place love as a core element of an open-hearted pedagogy. This consideration invites me to imagine a theory of empowerment that embraces complexity and love as acceptation.

Accepting complexity as a path of transformation

"Finding a way to increase complexity, or a way to realize a complexity that is always at hand, does not always have to involve grand designs of revolution; it can also find realization in the small resistances, common negotiations and perspective changes that occur on a daily basis in our schools – and in our lives."

Larsson and Dahlin, 2012: 12

Disabilities can be understood and recognized as other legitimate ways of being in the world, instead of something to avoid or change (Michalko, 2002). In a similar direction, Kind (2006) helps us to enhance the acceptation of what participants are, rather than trying to change them in order to increase self determination and independency. For Kind (2006: 42),

the lack of expectations is a form of love and acceptance of others as they are. In this way, we liberate the pedagogic relationship from the pressure of expected change and evolution that education often puts on students. Kind's a/r/tographic work inspires me to comprehend disability as a constraint that, when preceded by acceptance, has both the potential to either impede or encourage action and transformation.

In media projects, constraints such as deadlines are considered as elements of productive tension that lead to action (Castro and Grauer 2010). The constraint of time is the motivation to work through problems, tensions and fatigue. A sense of agency is said to be developed through the constraints of time and the creative process. Castro and Grauer (2010:19) understand agency as the "freedom to act from an understanding that students are depended on and can have an effect not only on their peers, but the working environment, the mentors, and the final product." In this direction, agency is understood as the responsibility of one's actions in relation to each other. This perspective might overestimate action as movement towards a predetermined productive outcome, and might dismiss stillness, contemplation, and other non-purpose actions that might lead to significant experiences that relax the mind and predispose us to be receptive to possibilities.

Action, however, in the practice-based research of a/r/tography could also be understood as the reflective process to become aware of the continuous movement of life, even in stillness. Furthermore, action could be understood as a way of becoming conscious of the radical relatedness (Bickel et al. 2011) among beings; as the process of presencing and embracing the emergence of the new. This might require a pause from purposeful action to take the time to feel and think how to deal with the complexity of the unexpected, complex, unfolding situations in educational contexts. Our capacity as a/r/tographers to act consciously and to be present in complex uncertain educational situations might be limited due to our professional expectations, predesigned outcomes or aesthetic preferences. In addition, our

individual tensions, back story, values or morality (cultural conventions) may also influence us and limit our capacity to be present. To approach these constraints, a/r/tography might challenge not just our critical awareness of the different ideals and ambitions of the artist, researcher and teacher, but also our ability to accept with humility our limitations, to negotiate our own contradictions and attend the emergence of the unexpected in the group. At the same time, the issue here is not about accepting participants' limited capacity as an act of love that might lead to transformation and empowerment. The challenge is to accept one's own capacity constraints to presence situations and learn to listen to the heart in a/r/tographic practice.

A/r/tography, then, might require a/r/tographers to explore and accept our limited capacities and constraints in our practice in order to be transformed by one's own love, acceptance and compassion. From this point, a potential of self-transformation might arise, and as Bishop (2005: 123) stated, we might become able to listen to and participate with those traditionally 'othered' as constructors of meaning of our own experiences. The acceptation of our limited capacities might help us to be empathetic and understand the constraints that others find through learning processes. This starting point of acceptation might inspire a potential path for change and transformation that departs from the heart and not so much in professional expectations, or our fear of the unpredictable. Paradoxically, as the comic story shows, this path of transformation might lead to the finding of participant's professional aspirations. In a similar direction, Triggs, Irwin & O'Donoghue (2012) state that "a/r/tographic practice veers away from already-defined certainties of what makes for good practice, away from a nuts and bolts technical know-how, and even from practical emphases on procedures."

Situating "aesth/ethics" in a/rtography: the contiguity of image and text.

"We are not responsible for our own actions or the actions of others (a passive approach that separates and distances), but our very Being, our subjectivities, identities, and ways of living in the world are gestures and situations that struggle with, contest, challenge, provoke, and embody an ethics of understanding and a responsibility."

(Irwin and Srpinggay 2008: xxxii)

Ethics of embodiment understand humans embedded in the process of "being-with-others" (Springgay, 2008: 154). Relationality is a central concept in a/r/tography, committed with processes of living inquiry that troubles and addresses difference "being with one another" in a "singular plural coexistence" (Irwin 2008: 71-72). Ethics are not prior to identities, but rather derived from the contradictions, ambiguities, and multiplicities of encounters between bodies/ subjects (Springgay 2008: 155). In art educational pedagogical relationships, ethics are related with the collective negotiation of aesthetic decisions. As mentioned before, professional expectations about high artistic quality results might impede a/r/tographers from encouraging the emergence of new aesthetic elements through participant's uncertain interactions, due to our aesthetic ideals and expectations that may direct the creative process. Nevertheless, a/r/tographers develop "an aesthetic interaction with the world, an artistry of words, living inquiry, and teaching, and simultaneously develop a community of relationships around that aesthetic (Wiebe, 2008: 95).

Aesthetics provide an interesting counterpoint to the accounts of empowerment, transformation, agency and social change (Thomas and Britton, 2012: 211). In examining the facilitator-participant relationship via the aesthetic product and decision-making process, Thomas and Britton suggest that a new perspective may be gained on some of the problem involved in power relationships, representation and intergroup relations. In relation to this, Low et al. (2012: 57) suggest that literature about empowerment through participatory video

does not stress until what extent participants must rely on the conventions of dominant narrative structures and rhetorical moves in order to get what feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (1995: ix) describes as a kind of choral uptake from their ruling-class audiences.

Aesth/ethics demand a/r/tographers to distance ourselves from our artistic ideals and conventions, and enter into conversation with others in order to listen and adapt our work to what comes out of those unexpected interactions. Our radical relationality in a process for inclusivity invites a/r/tographers to address our difficulties and limited capacity to be present in the group situation. However, the acknowledgment of our constraints can make us empathetic with participants with disabilities and cognitive difficulties. This way, participants can teach us a lesson of humility and empathy that has the potential to enhance our growth as artists, researchers, and teachers.

A/r/tographic practice and the contiguity of art and text allows me to take the risk of drawing comic narratives and explore the complexities of educational situations. A/r/tography understands contiguity as the relationship of visual arts and text in the process of inquiry (Irwin and Springgay 2008: xxviii). This relationship generates complex meanings that resist transparent interpretations. In this regard, Mackey and McClay (2000: 192) stress that reading comics and graphic novels require visual literacy abilities that might imply intellectual and emotional challenges, due to their hybrid visual and literary nature. Similarly, M. Cromer and P. Clark (2007) point out the hypertext quality of graphic novels, this is, the juxtaposition of diverse layers of meaning, which implies the potential of freedom of interpretation, ambiguity, and multiple coexistent meanings.

I have an intimate relationship with drawing that it allows me to look for "interior measures of meaning and value drawing on the personhood of participants in the conversation and the collective" (Gunnlaugson 2011: 12). My connection with ideas and emotions through drawing facilitates a process of meaning creation and play. Playing with narratives the game

of reconstructing experience is a cognitive emotional vital process that implies risk and experimentation. Nevertheless, this creative game that plays with multiple elements such as field notes, recordings, photography, memories, emotions and imagination, allows me to explore the complexity of relationality in participatory creative processes.

My aesth/ethic decision to create comics, regardless of their artistic quality, responds to my ethical commitment with participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Capstick (2012: 271) invites participatory video practitioners to place their practice in a situated ethics so that collective projects become inclusive. The author states three principles to inclusive practice which are: consent, the presumption of capacity, and confidentiality (Capstick, 2012: 273). Even though permission was obtained from parents and tutors to take photographs during the workshop sessions, I did not feel comfortable with the photographic exposure of participants. Participants were also asked if they wanted photos to be taken during the workshop in order to use them in a research project, and they accepted our request. The photos were taken by all of us, facilitating a rotation of the role of a "documentary maker" that shifted from participants to facilitators. Nevertheless, without dismissing the presumption of their capacity to understand what a research project is, and what use of images we would make, I would not give permission to myself to use these photographs in my research without some kind of aesthetic intervention. Photography can be a useful visual medium to document educational research experiences (Marín and Roldán, 2011), but the publication of these images might not be compatible with a commitment to confidentiality. Furthermore, there are significant situations that are not represented by the camera, and the narrative language of comics helped me to translate my field notes into a mixed visual and textual artistic creation.

Photography and drawing create multiple layers of meanings where confidentiality can be preserved. Drawing on photographs and simplifying physical characters might add an iconic character to the image that takes distance from reality. The combination of drawing and

photography might evoke a generative relationship between reality and the memories of the

written experience. Furthermore, comic graphic narratives invite me to use visual metaphors

to facilitate empathy and explore other intuitive visual narrative ways to convey experience

and knowledge. The relationship among the text and the image is uncertain, and leaves the

reader a space to imagine and construct interpretations of the narrative. Furthermore, because

the text in Spanish and English, it might generate unexpected reverberations.

Taking the responsibility to draw comic narratives as a way of living inquiry is not just

a way to try to make research more accessible and inclusive to a broader public. Drawing

comics as a/r/tographic practice is a way to offer the reader a contingent space to create

meaning, an invitation to become involved in the relational practice of "a/r/tographying" that

calls the presence of complexity as a path to love.

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