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Engaging, Validating, Imagining: A Comic-based Approach to (non)participation and Empowerment

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Abstract

This article engages with art education and disability justice through a story narrated using comics. *Lorena's Story* is a short graphic narrative that explores the complexity of taking responsibility for (non)participation during a participatory animation workshop for children and young people with disabilities. The story inspires a reflective process that questions the model of empowerment present in participatory video literature, validates the diverse ways of being in the world with disabilities and inspires a different notion of empowerment. Within arts-based educational research methods, the comic story is a site of knowledge that aims to provide a sense of integrity, sincerity and authenticity.

Translated abstract (Spanish)

Este artículo se compromete a establecer una conversación entre el área de educación artística y el reclamo de justicia social de los estudios de discapacidad a través del arte del cómic. La historia de Lorena es una narrativa breve que expresa la complejidad de tomar responsabilidad de la (no)participación durante un taller participativo de animación para niños, niñas y jóvenes con discapacidad. La historia inspira un proceso reflexivo que cuestiona el modelo de empoderamiento presente en la literatura de video participativo, valida diversas formas de ser en el mundo con discapacidad, e inspira una nueva noción de empoderamiento. Dentro de los métodos de investigación educativa basada en las artes, la historia del cómic es un espacio de conocimiento que se propone generar integridad, sinceridad y autenticidad.

Keywords: Comic-based educational research, (non)participation, Empowerment, A/r/tography, Social Justice, Disability.

Notes about art education, disability, participation and comic-based research

Previous studies in art education have considered the transdisciplinary field of critical disability studies to reflect on disability identity and representation (Derby 2011, Kallio-

Tavin 2015), challenging cultural systems of oppression (Keifer-Boyd, Bastos, Richardson and Wexler 2018), the notions of inclusivity based on special education in art education (Derby 2013, Wexler 2016, Eisenhauer 2008) and developing an inclusive arts education curriculum (Derby 2016). Art education stresses the value of participation when it is committed to social justice. Social justice art education is focused on transforming the world and promoting freedom and critical awareness within diverse types of cultural and political oppressions (Dewhurst 2010, 2014). Considering that disability has been historically excluded from social justice theory (Derby 2011), art education scholars stress the relevance of the project of merging art education with social justice and disability research traditions (Eisenhauer 2008). Moreover, art education has been considered to have the power to contribute to disability studies in diverse ways (Derby 2016). This article aims to combine writing and a graphic narrative to challenge the model of empowerment in participatory video literature when (non)participation arises. The narrative in the form of comic art in this article, Lorena's story, explores a (non)participation situation taking place during a cut-out short animated film workshop with children and young people with disabilities in a charity in the South of Spain. The aim of the workshop was to deliver a pedagogic experience that facilitated a space of social interaction, creativity and empowerment. Some of the concerns of social justice art education are what constitutes social change within participatory projects and whether the emphasis is placed on the process or the product of artmaking (Dewhurst 2010: 7). With a focus on the relational dimension of the creative process, I have created Lorena's story in the form of a comic for a deeper look at the process of empowerment and delving into the often-overlooked phenomena of (non)participation within participatory research methods.

Lorena's story

Figure 1: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story*, 2018. P.1. Copyright by the author.

Figure 2: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story*, 2018. P.2. Copyright by the author.
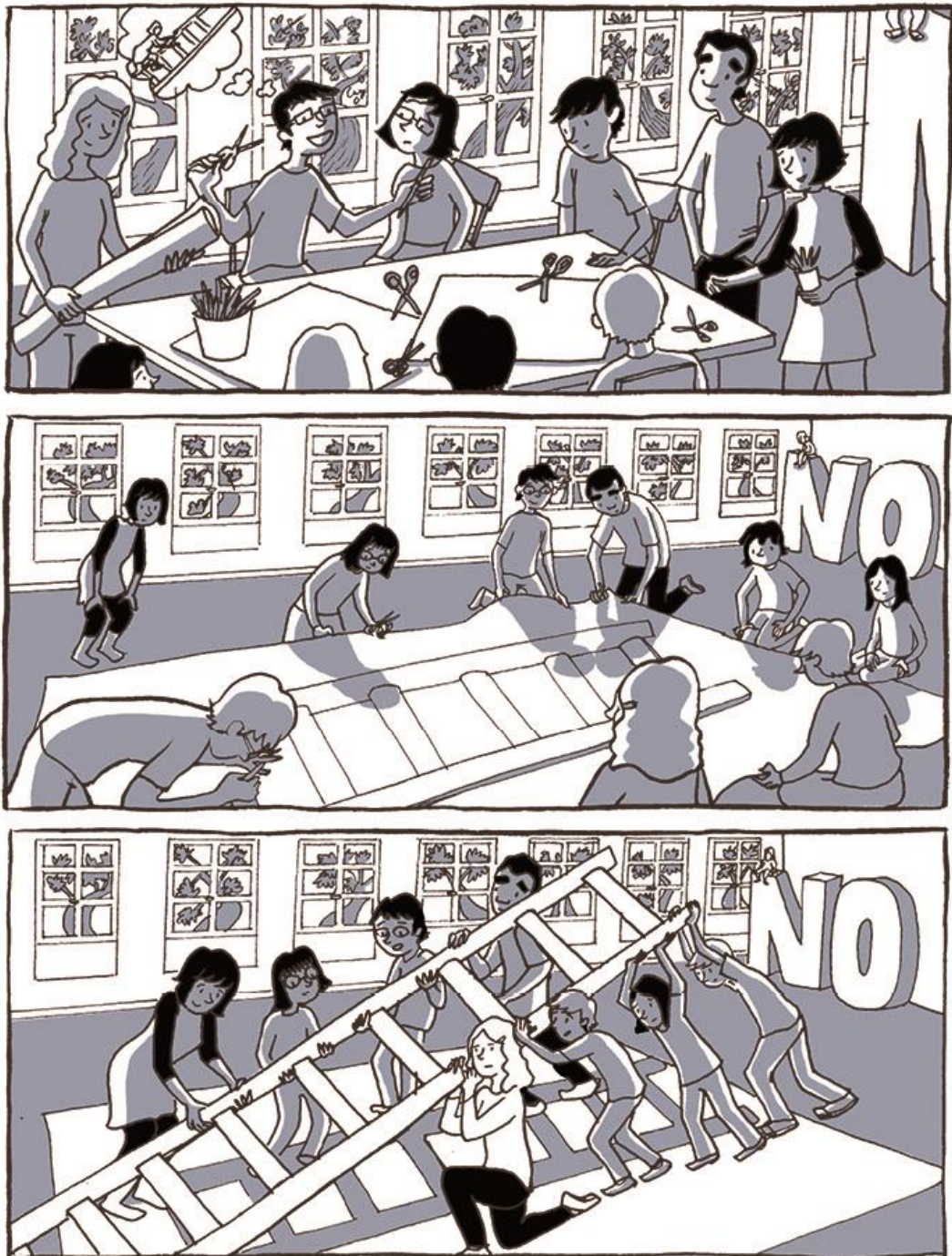
Figure 3: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story*, 2018. P.3. Copyright by the author.

Figure 4: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story*, 2018. P.4. Copyright by the author.

Figure 5: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story*, 2018. P.5. Copyright by the author.
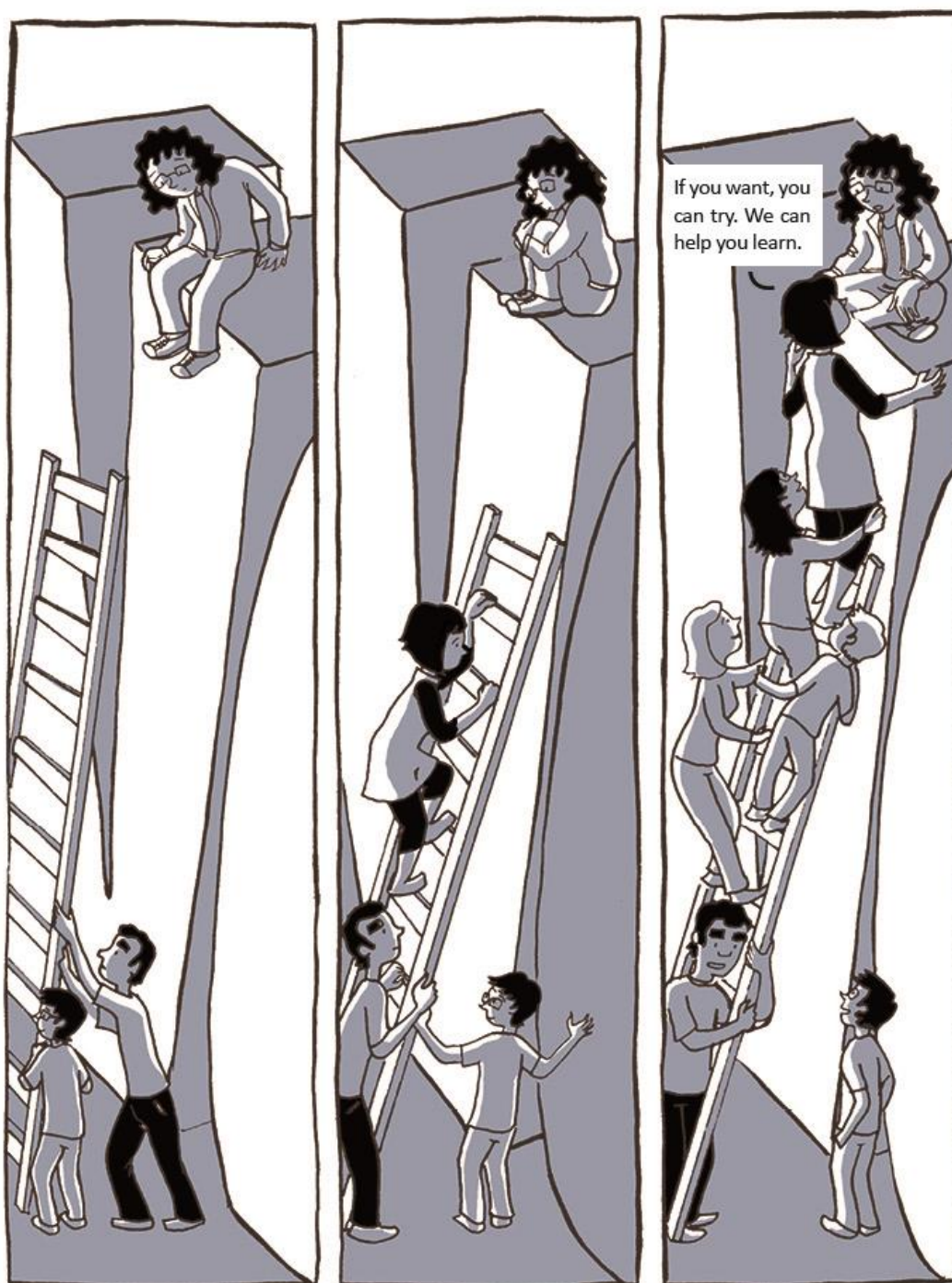
Figure 6: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story,* 2018. P.6. Copyright by the author.

Figure 7: Artwork by the author, *Lorena's Story,* 2018. P.7. Copyright by the author.

In order to make sense of Lorena's story and the challenge of (non)participation in the workshop, it is useful to consider the fields of social justice art education (Dewhurst 2010, 2014; Hanley, Noblit, Shepard and Barone 2013), art education committed with disability studies (Derby 2011, 2013, 2016; Wexler 2016; Keifer-Boyd, Bastos, Richardson and Wexler 2018) and participatory video (Low, Rose, Salvio and Palacios 2012; Milne, Mitchell and De Lange 2012; Mistry, Bignante and Berardi 2016; Milne 2016). These theories and practices inspire my motivation to provide participants with a sense of empowerment through collective artistic practice. Moreover, I engage in research through drawing to reflect on the challenges and contradictions involved in the process of empowerment. The decision to use the art of comics to reflect on educational experiences was informed by arts-based educational research literature, particularly a/r/tography (Irwin and De Cosson 2004; Triggs, Irwin and O'Donoghue 2012; Irwin 2013; LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu and Irwin 2015; Irwin et al. 2017). Previous scholarly comic-based research has been developed in the fields of anthropology (Bartoszko, Leseth and Ponomarew 2010), teacher training and art education (Jones and Woglom 2013a, 2013b), art education and identity (Roselló 2015), visual culture (Beccari 2014) and comic studies (Sousanis 2015, 2018; García 2014). Therefore, artists who have created stories about being educators (Cuffe 2018; Ayers and Alexander-Tanner 2010) might focus on humour, while my work uses serious graphic narratives as a resource to make sense of problematic and confusing situations. Lorena's story contributes to comic-based research that explores (non)participation in the field of art education.

Placing research questions in context

It is not easy to place Lorena's story in a specific field of knowledge since the practice of the workshop could be related to participatory video and art education committed with disability studies, but could not be exclusively grounded in any of these fields. Moreover, Lorena's story inspires an interdisciplinary approach to participation and (non)participation with an emphasis on the relational dimension of learning-teaching in art education. Even though social justice art education and participatory video belong to their respective fields, theories and practices, they share an interest in providing a sense of empowerment through participative action. Furthermore, academic literature on participatory video stresses the power of doing and making audiovisual narratives as sources of transformation (Braden 1999; Lunch and Lunch 2006; Shaw and Robertson 1997) with a celebratory tone. Some critical scholars like Milne (2016) invite researchers to take a critical stance towards the

celebratory descriptive tone of participatory video practices. From critical positions, there is an emphasis on how empowerment and engagement can take place, especially in research 'with young people, disabilities and with other so-called 'excluded', 'marginalised' and 'vulnerable groups' (Milne 2016: 401). Lorena's story claims that participatory video practices might overvalue taking part, while neglecting the relevance of the act of deciding not to be part of an activity. In this regard, some scholars point out that written acknowledgment of what happens when people refuse to participate is relevant (Milne 2012; Low, Rose, Salvio and Palacios 2012). Lorena's story triggers the following research questions: How can participatory research render the negation to engage in the creative process? How can facilitators take responsibility for (non)participation?

Connecting social justice art education, disability justice and participatory video

While social justice art education has a strong commitment to challenge racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, disability justice is 'a sociopolitical activist framework that recognises entangled forms of oppression and aims to challenge the reliability of categories and definitions of disability' (Keifer-Boyd, Bastos, Richardson and Wexler 2018: 267). In disability justice, inclusion means that disability is 'fully recognised as providing alternative values for living that do not simply reify reigning concepts of normalcy' (Mitchell and Snyder 2015: 5). Disability justice recognises disability fully as an alternative way of being and living (Mitchell and Snyder 2015: 5), challenging the premise that it is better to be able-bodied and able-minded than it is to be disabled (Wexler and Derby 2015). Wexler proposes to use the arts as a means to reimagining disability within a social space, including neurological and cognitive differences, so that 'student empowerment and equity might be established in the art room' (2016: 33). Other scholars consider that a study of disability can deepen our understanding of art education (Penketh 2014: 293). In this regard, Lorena's story challenges the idea of participation and engagement within social justice art education.

In order to make sense of Lorena's story of (non)participation, its essential to understand what participation is. Considering that participation can have diverse meanings within different fields, the workshop could be placed within participatory video practices. The reason to refer to participatory video literature may seem inadequate taking into account that the workshop was not committed with the use of video to capture reality. Nevertheless, the activity of the workshop was based on imaginative drawing and storytelling through cut-out animation, which resonates with those participatory video practices that use storytelling as a

transformative device (Hull and Katz 2006; Ochs and Capps 2001). Participatory video scholars Dougherty and Sawhney (2012) state that practitioners will 'continue to redefine what participation means in the context of grassroots, codesigned, or collaborative media production as well as in research and education' (p. 452). Milne defines participatory video as 'the use of filmic practices to engage and coproduce a conversation/research with people according to their interest and potential' (2016: 402). The author stresses that scholarly research should be engaged in critical inquiry, committed with feminist and emancipatory epistemologies, focused on participation and considering the desire of participants to operate in the direction of social change. This definition does not seem to consider the possibility of the (non) participation that Lorena's story demands. Therefore, regarding the issue of participation, the author stresses the relevance of situating practice instead of focusing on enabling participants with technical skills on equal involvement at every stage of the process (Milne 2016: 302). Despite the good intentions of participatory video practices, there is a risk of considering participation implicitly liberating when it might not be so (Williams 2003). When Lorena rejected to participate, she challenged my motivation and ideals. There are tensions between participants' motivations within participatory video projects and their alignment with the academic objectives to be achieved within a set timeframe of funded projects (Mistry, Bignante and Berardi 2016). Additionally, projects might not always match the interests of the communities they work with. Motivations are often subtle and multi-layered, and revealing them could lead to conflict and/or (non)participation (Mistry, Bignante and Berardi 2016: 417). My expectation to provide Lorena with a sense of empowerment was frustrating when she repeatedly rejected our invitation to collaborate and engage. The idea that empowerment and engagement will necessarily take place needs to be examined (Milne 2016). If participation is related to empowerment, how do we know when empowerment is taking place? Is (non)participation necessarily a failure in the participation process?

Empowerment is one of the main aims of participatory video practices that could be described as a symbolic transformation due to a practice that has the aim to develop psychological confidence and trust in the success of actions (Shaw 2012: 229). Empowerment is defined as a process that happens in three stages: communication, group action and social exchange. I would like to explore to what extent this model of empowerment can be applied to participatory projects with children and young people with disabilities. A first stage of the empowering process requires opening spaces of dialogue, expression and communication that enhances individual confidence within the group (Shaw

2012). This first stage is problematic considering that communication can be very challenging, if not impossible, for some neurodiverse participants who prefer not to talk in public and communicate in restricted ways. When Lorena rejects participation, she excludes herself from the group, and does not allow this communication or confidence to be developed because she struggles in communicating verbally with others.

Following Shaw (2012), a second stage of the empowerment process moves from oral expression to agency and creative engagement where participants share pieces of their life stories and elaborate their identities with a transformative purpose. When working with children and young people with learning differences and disabilities, it is not considered to what extent participants will engage or how rejections and resistances to participation will be rendered. Not taking part is not considered. Moreover, Lorena struggled using scissors; she would reject this activity as well as anything related to the manipulation of objects requiring specific movements in a three-dimensional space. She would struggle with tying her shoelaces, brushing her hair and completing every-day tasks. Regarding her limited verbal communication, Lorena didn't really contribute at all to the creation of the story, but occasionally collaborated on some of the creative stages that she found enjoyable, such as animating in a 2D space with cut-out characters.

A third stage of the empowerment process is characterized by the group sharing their production with a broader social audience and receiving some kind of feedback (Shaw 2012: 232). The final animated film was shown to parents and families engaged with the charity in an event celebrated in a school. Participants did not present the work themselves since they felt nervous in doing so, and therefore, did not receive immediate public feedback. There was an opportunity for the public to ask questions to the creators, but the participants were nervous about standing in front of people. Instead, they preferred to hide behind the facilitator.

Following the participatory video approach to empowerment (Shaw 2012), Lorena would have hardly had experienced any development of psychological confidence or trust in the success of her actions. She hardly communicated verbally with the group, had not shared pieces of her life story, did not fully participate in every creative stage and could not present her artwork to the public to receive feedback. Considering Lorena's story, a model of empowerment in participatory video practices would need to be re-imagined when working with children and young people with disabilities. Lorena's story invites me to imagine a view

of empowerment in relation to disability that includes limited verbal communication, situations of (non)participation and the difficulty in engaging with others in the presentation of the artwork created. Other indicators of empowerment might be needed in participatory video practices engaged with disabilities that don't necessarily point to a pre-established desirable concept of success of actions. Moreover, a different concept of empowerment could be defined so that it acknowledges the realities and experiences of disabled people as valid ways of being. Further, perhaps the expectation of transformative change of the researcher towards social justice can put too much pressure in a specific desirable direction, leaving no space for the other to be and become. In this regard, arts-based educational research engaged with disability can have a preference for acceptance of what it is, unencumbered by expectations of change over the discourse of empowering action (Kind 2006: 42). The concept of 'participants' implies that some kind of action and engagement will be taking place. Kind (2006) questions this approach and, instead of action, she invites scholars to place presence and radical acceptance as the central factor of pedagogy. This approach resonates with Kallio-Tavin's reflection on Levinas responsibility when encountering the 'other' as something 'I do not know and will never get to know' since 'responding to the other's otherness is an ethical act of respect' (Kallio-Tavin 2015: 5). In addition, Kallio-Tavin (2015) points to the tensions between ethics (regarding the encounter of the other) and the desire of social change (within social justice art education). When working with disabilities, researchers and facilitators oscillate between enhancing film-making for change, and radical acceptance of the other. This tension questions the responsibility for the empowering process during situations of (non) participation. My approach to this challenge is to take responsibility through arts-based educational research methodologies, thereby creating Lorena's story.

Methodological issues: Taking responsibility through comic-based educational research

Lorena's story points to the second question addressed in this article regarding the responsibility for (non)participation. How do researchers take responsibility when participation happens and when it does not? Derby stressed the relevance of doing research by paying attention to the perspectives and interests of disabled people themselves and 'not just about disable people' (2013: 377) in order to acknowledge the 'validity of diverse ways of being' (2013: 379). I could not take on the mission to write with Lorena's view on the (non)participation situation. Furthermore, I could take a situated relational position towards my

experience of the workshop and recognize the validity of (non)participation within participatory projects. I tried to maintain an awareness 'of the situation of production, the positions of power, and my interests in the production of knowledge' (Pérez-Bobadilla 2018: 69) throughout the project. From my partial perspective and limited location, within my embodied experience, I drew paying attention to the contradictions and tensions found within the ideal of participation where Lorena repeatedly refuses to take part. I take responsibility for engaging with arts-based educational research by drawing a narrative that uses metaphors and imaginary representation of spaces to acknowledge our embodied interaction.

Arts-based research is considered to be the evolution of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences that has led to a form of 'scholartistry' where research does not only record data but also makes it (Cahnman-Taylor and Siegesmund 2018: 2–5). Arts-based research locates itself within the social sciences and their ethical discussions committed with work with human subjects. Within the research process, there is an embodied engagement with the world where what counts is 'full attentiveness to the movement' and not our efficiency in reaching a predetermined destination (Cahnman-Taylor and Siegesmund 2018: 5). In this regard, Lorena's story pays attention to the potential of drawing to generate metaphors that delve into a situation of (non)participation. As the comic artist and scholar Sousanis states, 'drawing is deeply connected to thinking, it is a way to come to understand things differently and make connections' (2018: 198).

Within arts-based research, this article follows the methodology of a/r/tography, a practice-based research methodology that intertwines the epistemic paradigms of art, pedagogy and research, to study the processes of learning and the construction of knowledge (Irwin and De Cosson 2004). A/r/tography goes further than arts-based methods 'by recognizing the educative potential of teaching and learning as acts of inquiry' (Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, Bickel 2006). Therefore, a/r/tography is based on the arts and writing as well as on education with an emphasis on practice. A/r/tographic practice is relational and happens in movement. It is a dynamic process of relating to others with our singularities and differences (Triggs, Irwin and O'Donoghue 2012: 11). Furthermore, relationality has three important dimensions in this article. Firstly, it involves paying attention to the relationships between participants, myself and the web of institutional and cultural meanings that might condition pedagogic relations. Drawing Lorena's story allows me to use the metaphoric ladder to climb Lorena's 'no' and try to make sense of that challenging metaphoric distance

between her and the group. It also allows me to understand and realise that the initiative to 'draw a ladder' and generate an opportunity for participation to take place came from one of the participants of the group and not from the facilitator. My role as a facilitator was to listen to what was happening among the group and support their initiatives to invite each other to engage. In addition, my role was to listen to Lorena's negation and give it a valid place while giving her the option to learn to use the scissors if she wanted to do so. The three panels with the view of the tree changing through the seasons point at the passage of time and how Lorena took time to be open to the possibility of engaging temporally. Whenever she became familiar with some of the activities, she would enjoy them until a new task was proposed. However, she would deny participating again at the proposition of a new task. I learned to allow this pattern to unfold without feeling that I was failing—and learned to be with it, recognise it as a valid way of being in the world—and respected whenever Lorena wanted to take part and whenever she did not.

A second aspect of relationality in a/r/tography emphasises the relevance of the dialog between the roles of the artist, researcher and teacher that drives the process of inquiry. Many researchers have found in a/r/tography a way of being and becoming in the world that considers artistic practice a credible and recognised form of academic research (Irwin et al. 2017). The shared reflection on practice generates new understandings as artist-researcher-teachers engage with creative and challenging ideas. These roles are not easy to separate from one another since drawing is a way of inquiring into the experience of the workshop where the artist (drawer) and researcher (inquirer) work intimately with the perception of the facilitator (teacher) to make sense of (non)participation. In this direction, Schroeder (2015) enhances the relevance of bringing creative practice closer to research as a way to seek integrity, sincerity and authenticity as indicators of validity in academic research. The author pays attention to the relevance of the body and the role of the artist and the artworks in the making of knowledge within the paradigms of qualitative research. Embodied knowing may have a dimension that we cannot always articulate where the tools of creation become our extension. Moreover, materials and processes become productive and producers in their own right (Bolt 2007). Additionally, drawing feels like an embodied brave act where the line represents the lived experience taking responsibility for potential failures. There is a struggle to acknowledge the gap between the personal motivation to enhance participation, and participants' motivation to not engage. Drawing becomes an act of integrity when paying

attention to the responsibility of the researcher facing the potential failure of (non) participation as an authentic commitment with the process of inquiry.

A third relevant aspect of relationality points to the contiguity of the text and the image in the graphic narrative so that the visual and the writing complement each other and generate complex layers of meaning. Furthermore, 'comic-based' research does not point to humour, but to the art of comics or graphic narratives as a method to inform the complexities of educational processes engaged with participation enhancement. Sullivan (2014) mentions that the art of research is 'animated by a need to get inside problems and issues in order to draw out ideas using whatever visual and forming systems and structures make sense' (p. 270). For Sullivan, 'art introduces a capacity to explore data outside the limits of language and opens up the possibility for new knowledge to emerge' (2014: 280). After working on Lorena's story, I realized that there was a surprising emphasis on collective agency and the potential of participants to facilitate empowerment between themselves. Participation does not seem to be something that can be secured or delivered under certain pre-planned conditions. It seems to be a matter of love, respect, acceptance and profound commitment with the other. This commitment involves managing inner resistances and tensions regarding the discrepancy between a researcher's ideals of participation and the reality of (non)participation. Through a creative-reflective practice, a/r/tography encourages artists-researchers-teachers to 'open to wonder while trusting uncertainty' and engage in their own becoming while learning to be in communities of inquiry (LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu and Irwin, 2015: 355). Lorena's story is a way to engage in a mutual process of becoming where (non)participation is accepted and acknowledged as an opportunity to learn with and from the participatory research project.

Regarding the challenge of taking responsibility through drawing, Sousanis points to the potential of the comic format to 'bridge the divide between scholarly and public dialogue' (2018: 192). My graphic narratives were based on the documentation of the workshop (photos, videos, writings). In a first stage of the documentation process, I was concerned with reporting the experience accurately. In the second stage, when I selected fragments of my research diary to create comic stories, I progressively gave myself permission to be open to imagination and use metaphors. Sousanis stresses that through his process of inquiry 'drawing and writing facilitated understandings that couldn't be attained otherwise' (2018: 190). In this regard, *Unflattening* (2015) emphasizes the equivalence between aesthetics and analysis, where, form (the visual) and meaning are 'united and inform one another' (2018:

193). The decision to do the work visually 'has to do something for you that you can't do otherwise' (2018: 194). Thus, drawing provided a way of having a conversation with myself (Sousanis 2018: 196) that allowed me to try to make sense of the (non)participation pattern represented in Lorena's story.

Conclusions: Engaging, validating, imagining

The main contributions of this article can be articulated through what it may do when entering in conversation with others: engaging, validating and imagining. The theoretical discussion engages with social justice art education and disability justice, stressing the potential of art education and disability studies to contribute to each other, respectively. The graphic story inspired by arts-based educational research has the potential to connect and engage with an audience, using images in relation to text to suggest new insights into (non)participation and empowerment. Lorena's story inspires a critical reflection on the model of empowerment in participatory video practices. The story validates (non)participation as an opportunity to reflect on each other's motivations and ideals regarding participatory projects. The article emphasises the relevance of re-imagining the participatory video model of empowerment to include limited verbal communication, the rejection to take part and the impairments that participants may find to share the creative outcome with others. A new model of empowerment could be informed by an emphasis on relationality and not on doing: a notion of empowerment focused on the openness to learn to be together and grow mutually in distinctive and uncertain processes of becoming.

Through arts-based educational research, this article validates the presence of (non)participation in participatory processes, not as a failure but as a situation to pause and think about. The desired empowering effect on participants with disabilities may not correspond with facilitators' pre-established expectations. From this approach, empowerment would not depend on participation, verbal communication or continuous engagement. Empowerment could embrace (non)participation if there is integrity, sincerity and authenticity in the research narrative based on mutual respect. Empowerment can include multiple situations when participants are validated in the way they are every moment, while being given opportunities to learn and challenge their resistances to change through creative engagement. It could be as empowering for a participant to say no than to take part in the creative process as long as they are given a space to decide, negotiate, withdraw, learn, act and not act.

In this article, arts-based educational research is a way to take responsibility for (non)participation and provide a sense of integrity, sincerity and authenticity needed in the commitment for working with people. Drawing unfolds some surprising aspects of empowerment that were not present in the literature: the relevance of collective agency, the relational dimension of participation and the uncertainty of the relational process. Moreover, participation is enhanced between the members of a group when encouraging each other to collaborate and create together. Participants engage each other in the creative process with the attentive presence of the facilitator who listens and supports group dynamics. Drawing allows the researcher to visualise and problematise the metaphoric distance that (non)participation generates between members of the group. Drawing has the potential to condense emotional subjective elements of the experience that could not be integrated with the same efficiency through language. The journey of qualitative research with people can sometimes become a journey where there is no map and no destination, but a movement unfolding moment by moment that demands attention and validation. Therefore, the comic story is a site of knowledge focused on the relational creative process, the struggle to identify how empowerment might take place or not and how to take ethical responsibility for (non)participation situations in the midst of uncertainty.

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