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Pratiques relationnelles dans la recherche axée sur les arts
Une table ronde sur le projet Fostering Dialogues

Celeste Pang, Brittany A.E. Jakubiec et Melanie Schambach

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Résumé de l'article

Fostering Dialogues est un projet d'action et de recherche axé sur les arts qui regroupe des personnes âgées LGBTQ+ et des préposés aux soins à domicile dans le cadre d'un programme virtuel d'art et de dialogue afin d'explorer le présent et l'avenir des soins communautaires. Dans cette note de recherche, l'équipe composée d'artistes et de chercheurs se penche sur la relation entre ces derniers et sur la collaboration artistique, en abordant des sujets comme la participation de la collectivité, la prise de décision horizontale et le pouvoir des images pour susciter le changement.

Relational Practices in Arts-Based Research: A Roundtable Reflection on the Fostering Dialogues Project

by Celeste Pang, Brittany A.E. Jakubiec, and Melanie Schambach

Abstract: *Fostering Dialogues* was an arts-based action research project that brought together LGBTQ+ older adults and homecare personal support workers in a virtual arts and dialogue program to explore presents and futures of community-based care. In this Research Note the artist and researcher team reflect on the researcher-artist relationship and arts-based collaboration, touching on topics including community engagement, horizontal decision-making, and the power of images to affect change.

Keywords: arts-based methods; care; community-engaged research; LGBTQ+

Résumé: *Fostering Dialogues* est un projet d'action et de recherche axé sur les arts qui regroupe des personnes âgées LGBTQ+ et des préposés aux soins à domicile dans le cadre d'un programme virtuel d'art et de dialogue afin d'explorer le présent et l'avenir des soins communautaires. Dans cette note de recherche, l'équipe composée d'artistes et de chercheurs se penche sur la relation entre ces derniers et sur la collaboration artistique, en abordant des sujets comme la participation de la collectivité, la prise de décision horizontale et le pouvoir des images pour susciter le changement.

Mots clés: méthodes axées sur les arts; soins; recherche effectuée auprès des collectivités; LGBTQ+

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H ow can researchers engage in ethical relationships with artist collaborators? What ways of relating can the process of arts-based action research inspire?

'In this roundtable group interview, we reflect on the researcher-artist relationship and co-creation experience in the *Fostering Dialogues* project. *Fostering Dialogues* was a community-based, arts-based action research project that brought together LGBTQ+ older adults and homecare personal support workers (PSWs) from Ontario in a virtual 12-week arts and dialogue program. This program explored themes of

home, care, and futures of community-based care through facilitated conversations, art-making, and co-creation of a digital mural.

A main goal of the *Fostering Dialogues* project was to learn about how arts-based action research can help to create connections among LGBTQ+ older adults and homecare PSWs—as multiply marginalized groups in society and within care systems—to creatively reckon with present situations and to imagine what could be otherwise. Arts-based action research allows for artmaking to play a primary role in knowledge co-creation, at the same time that art is a source of data representation (Kunt 2020). To date, we have launched an online exhibit of the collective digital mural that participants created (see Figure 1) (Fostering Dialogues project participants 2023), published an open-access report (Pang, Jakubiec, and Schambach 2023), shared findings with two collaborator groups, and presented preliminary reflections on our process and impact of arts-based action research methods at the Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) 2023 conference.

Figure 1. *Imagining Futures of Care* by Fostering Dialogues project participants. To view on and download from the interactive website see: https://egale.ca/egale-in-action/fostering-dialogues-arts-based-research-project/

For this Research Note, we wanted to hit pause and reflect further on this process by bringing the artist and researcher team back together to discuss the artist-researcher relationship and arts-based co-creation. The interviewees are Melanie Schambach, an artivist and community-based creator with over two decades experience facilitating social arts projects and participatory paintings; Brittany Jakubiec, co-researcher and Director of Research at Egale Canada; and Celeste Pang, co-researcher and current professor in women's and gender studies at Mount Royal University. The guiding interview questions were inspired by questions we have been asked by the public, including at the WGSRF conference, and were ultimately agreed upon by the *Fostering Dialogues* group. The discussion was held online over Zoom, recorded, and later transcribed and edited by the authors.

Ultimately, the questions and responses are intended as a reference document for others considering ethics and practice in arts-based action research. We touch on issues such as the value of arts-based research in meaningfully engaging community, horizontal decision-making, respect and acknowledgement in the researcher-artist relationship, the movement from intent to impact, and the power of images to affect change.

Melanie: *Celeste, Brittany, what was the inspiration behind this project?*

Celeste: One of the foundational ideas was simply to get a group of LGBTQ+ older adults together with PSWs. Through research and conversations I had heard in community, I had observed that there is often a significant disconnect between PSWs and LGBTQ+ older adults. Many LGBTQ+ older adults may have fears or concerns about receiving homecare. But sometimes those fears or concerns can get displaced onto PSWs, as individuals or as a group, in ways that can be racist or tinged with assumptions about where they come from. On the flipside, there's also a need to make LGBTQ+ histories and people more present in homecare. So, the idea was to bring folks together to have a dialogue, to get to know one another, and to explore and challenge the underlying assumptions that they may have.

Brittany: Because one of the main goals was building bridges between these two groups of participants, it was important to take a different type of approach to our methodology. Early on it really became clear that arts-based research could play that role in creating a space where folks could share their experiences and build connections with each other. Arts-based methodologies allows participants to explore more sensitive topics through artmaking rather than relying on words alone, and it also allows people to feel a sense of ownership and empowerment in the research process, as well as in the outcome of the research.

B: *A question for Melanie: What did you think when we approached you about the idea and potential collaboration? What made it seem feasible, interesting, or a project that you would decide to take on?*

M: I gravitate towards finding ways to turn paintings into action. In these paintings, there are stories, insight, and content that have the potential to affect policy. But decision-makers and those who affect policy need to have these images translated into a more tangible language. When I saw the opportunity to work with you in this way, I thought this [participatory painting] process could contribute to a more systemic level of change.

On a community level, while collaborating with settlement organizations, I've seen a need to get different immigrant communities to be more aware of the long legacies of homophobic attitudes. Parallel to this, I've seen a lack of cultural sensitivity in the queer spaces through my community organizing work. It is important to me that everyone reflects on service and inclusion, going beyond being informed and following protocols, and look deeper into ourselves and our assumptions from this place of love and care. How do we create dialogues to see the gaps and amend bridges? I believe art has a powerful way of opening up the emotional self and connecting people, allowing them to step into the courage it takes to have in-depth conversations.

M: *From your perspective, what made it doable? How did you pull those strings behind the curtains to make this happen and to find funding for it?*

B: We were lucky to get one-year funding from the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR) through a Catalyst Grant for community-led research on LGBTQIA/2S wellness. Through that funding, we were able to set aside a good amount to bring you on, Melanie, and to have you be meaningfully in-

volved in decision-making and shaping the project. We also had support from VHA Home Healthcare [a non-profit home healthcare agency based in Ontario]. The lovely folks there helped to spread the word to their PSWs about the project and to brainstorm ideas about how to move the project forward after the funding period. The other part that made the project doable was the participants; they were really committed to the process and ready to take that ride with us, which I think made it doable within a tight timeframe.

C: Absolutely. Linked to that, I think, was the ability that we had to explore. While it was a tight timeframe, we did not feel squeezed to immediately figure out how everything was going to be. From the grant-writing stage onwards, we started out with these key themes of home, care, and futures of community-based care. And within those three broad buckets, we could really start working with you, Melanie, and begin that process of creating. From decisions to alternate between arts and dialogue-focused sessions, to putting together a "run of show" guide for each session, we were able to create so much space for participants to drive where the project would go. I think ultimately that's what made it doable, and so enjoyable to do.

C: *And, Melanie, how would you describe the artist-researcher collaboration at the outset of this project and as a whole? What did it look like, feel like, for you? And how was it similar or different from other collaborations you've been part of in the past?*

M: There is insight in the stories that are told and the stories that are drawn. But I find it even more interesting and exciting to look into what happens with the stories *in relation* to one another. The participatory process offers architecture and structure where the insights happen relationally. Underneath the stories, quotes, and images, there is wisdom about what is happening among people.

The sessions are designed with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Activities are chosen intentionally in hopes that participants can be themselves as much as possible. The creative process can bring up a lot of fears, such as fear of uncertainty, fear of failure, and fear of not being perfect. But when we co-create a space encouraging positive affirmations and support, we face those fears together and turn them into a transformational experience. This allows the more complex human to show up, where we don't have to leave half of ourselves outside the Zoom meeting.

Also, *image* is a powerful universal language. Our cognitive brain can be a little bit delayed when our imagination kicks in and considers images. So, image-making is like opening a door to a field of ideas that we've never really thought about. When we step into the world of imagination, we learn as we react to the process. Images also leave space for ambiguity. Sometimes they hold ideas that are unresolved or that carry hidden answers or expressions of the subconscious mind.

C: *Thank you. And in terms of collaboration with community organizations, is there any insight you'd share about what hasn't gone well?*

M: Something I've learned a lot about in this research is the ethics around horizontal collaboration. As an artivist, I felt understood, seen, and valued throughout, from the way we made decisions to checking on different ways of acknowledgment.

Looking back two decades, I've had to consciously work on being invisible as a leader because it is important for people to understand that everyone is an artist. The Western understanding of the arts is founded on professionalizing the arts and creating a division between artists and non-artists. When I come in with a

community-based or social arts approach, it's important to reframe power and create a horizontal field to regenerate the sense that everyone is an artist. In this context, my invisibility is key.

Unfortunately, working on being invisible—I'm using the word invisible just for lack of other words—has had some negative impacts on past collaborations, like organizations collecting and misusing funds or partners claiming authorship and discrediting my work. There was one instance where a group of professors wrote a journal article taking full credit for a process I designed and facilitated. This process has been created by the lives and stories of diverse communities that are often misheard or misrepresented.

I've been conflicted about knowing when to come to the front and ask to be acknowledged as an artivist. If I claim authorship, is that going to jeopardize the importance of reframing the idea that everyone is an artist? I didn't have the answer until *Fostering Dialogues.* Between us, we've had this shared understanding that the process of creating that horizontal playing field was a vital element for research. Not only among participants but in everything we were doing. I felt valued and validated throughout the process. I feel hopeful for me and all the social artists who have struggled to make work that is ethical.

C: *Brittany, building on Melanie's reflections, did you want to add anything from a research perspective about the ethics of doing this kind of community engaged work, especially with LGBTQ+ folks?*

B: To the question of ethics, Celeste and I have chatted about this in relation to this project but also outside of this project, thinking about how we do community-based research as an organization and as individuals and the values that we bring to the type of work that we do. This project allowed us to stretch those muscles and really come into our understanding of what it can look like to do community-based and community-engaged research. I think the piece that a lot of people could take away is around horizontal decision-making and bringing more people to the table to make decisions collaboratively, and to see value in doing that. In research, depending on who is the researcher, who is the funder, and timelines, there can be this desire to make decisions quickly but without everyone's voice and perspective to weigh things out carefully.

In this project, an intention that was set early on was that you, Melanie, were an equal voice at the table. And once we got the funding, we would decide what the project looked like together. You were always there with us. You were a social artist but you were also a co-researcher. In so many ways you helped make the decisions that shaped how the project went. You helped us create the sandbox for folks to play within. And then participants as well, creating the spaces for participants to have a say in what the project looked like, what the outcomes were, what the directions were. That took us doing a lot of deep listening and checking in together but also reflecting on the conversations we had with participants and sometimes deciding to pivot.

B: *A question for Melanie: What do you think went especially well? And would you change anything?*

M: The relational practice that we had as organizers was really balanced, from the ability to react to the process being as fluid as possible to having well-founded intentions. Plans are so often rooted in a budget and not really rooted in the intentions, right? We were able to stay true to our intentions the whole way through and be flexible for the rest to take shape and morph.

Something that I'm always craving to be improved, not just in *Fostering Dialogues*, is what happens to the participants after the project ends. Will relationships remain once the project is not part of the equation?

What bridges do we need to build so that participants can continue that work in their workplace and their communities? If we were a seed, who is watering it after we are gone?

M: *From a research perspective, what else do you think you went especially well? What other things do you feel we could still work on?*

C: Can I first make a followup comment to what you just said, Melanie? It's about this conundrum. The challenge of knowing how you can keep in touch with participants, show up for participants if they reach out, that's also a researcher challenge. As an anthropologist, it's very common in our work and accepted in the discipline that you spend a lot of time with people. As a researcher, you participate in or get to know about their daily lives and you can become friends. It's kind-of understood that a longer-term relationship can be okay. Whereas in other disciplines, the norm is often for researcher and participant contact to be very limited in scope and in time. So, it's a shared conundrum.

In this project, participants can keep in touch with us, they can contact us if they have ideas about what they want to do next or seek support for something we can help with. At the same time, there was that distance created by being online. For example, one of our participants was hospitalized during the process and didn't continue to the end of the sessions. And despite trying to get in touch, we don't know how he's doing. We don't know why he didn't come back. While there were a lot of upsides to doing this project online, this format also shaped how we could and couldn't follow-up with participants in some ways.

B: I was reflecting on the time during which we ran the project and that we had only a year to do it. We were deep in it and it felt like enough time to finish what we had set out to within the grant and the project outline. But in terms of getting the word out about what this project was, what our recommendations are, and having people engage with the art and the report, it's that piece where if we had had more time, we could have done a lot more.

You also asked what went well. For me, seeing the change not only in individuals during the project but also seeing collective changes: understanding each other as well as the self. I still remember some of those big narrative arcs that participants went through during the process. I think what I learned from that is the beauty of holding that much space, of having eight sessions together, the gift of time really allowed people to settle in, to find that creative voice again, to develop rapport and trust with each other, and start to share things about their lives and about their journeys and experiences. I think that was really special.

C: *As a final question for all of us: What would you say to other people considering arts-based action research or embarking on a similar project (in addition to everything we've mentioned already)?*

M: Writing grant applications is an art in itself. It is something I shy away from. I think you two have something interesting to share about this. I was surprised when reviewers acknowledged this work as a decolonial practice. Can you speak more about the process of grant-writing and knowing when not to hold back?

C: I would say maybe that we're in a climate where we can be very explicit about the impact of our work. Often grant-writing is so strategic, right? But it was significant that the grant reviewers recognized that and articulated their acknowledgement.

B: Arts-based work has inherent participatory aspects to it. We were all coming to the table with something of value, adding something to the dynamic of the project. And in the research world, researchers

hold a lot of power, including decision-making power depending on how a project is framed. If you're going to pursue arts-based research, make sure you're not trying to fit it into models of research that are hierarchical, that is, where the researcher holds all the power.

C: And building on that, art is not just an illustration. It can be taken seriously. It's not a statistic, it's an image. And that has meaning and that has power. It's not just there to illustrate a different type of fact or a different piece of evidence.

M: Yes. It is important to understand the different intentions: the process of creating images with others versus the final production. The process is about the depth of engagement of the participants and the quality of connection, while the intent of the final image is to have a strong impact on a wider audience. The process and the final production are both equally important. The art is in not letting one overwrite the other.

B: This project was about dreaming and bringing together two groups of people impacted by the same systems to imagine new futures of community-based care through collective art making. From our shared experiences in this project, it is clear that there is great value in engaging community in arts-based research. We encourage others to explore how arts-based research can be part of "taking back the future."

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