

Rethinking Visual Arts–Based Methods of Knowledge Generation and Exchange in and beyond the Pandemic

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Abstract

This inaugural special issue of ‘Beyond the Text’ brings together a collection of visual arts (animation, creative and fine art, film, photographs, and zines) produced by children, young people, families, artists, and academics as part of co-created research during the 2020–2021 coronavirus pandemic. Our aim, in making these pieces available in this new publication format, is to illustrate the potential of visual arts as a form of co-creation and knowledge exchange which can transcend the challenges of researching ‘at a distance’, enable participants and co-researchers to share their stories, and support different ways of knowing for academic, policy, and public audiences. This is not to suggest that such methods offer transparent windows into participants’ worlds. As the reflections from the contributing authors consider, visual arts outputs leave room for audience interpretations, making them vulnerable to alternative readings, generating challenges and opportunities about how much it is possible to know about another and what is ethical to share. It is to these issues of ethics, representation, and voice that this special issue attends, reflecting on the possibilities of arts-based approaches for knowledge generation and exchange in and beyond the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords

animation, arts-based methods, children, coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, film, marginalisation, remote research, young people families, zines

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Introduction

The context for this inaugural special issue of ‘Beyond the Text’ is the continuing marginalisation of children, young people, and disadvantaged, including poorer families in policy, politics, and public discourse. As has been well documented, the difficulties faced by the most vulnerable in society have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and policy responses which pushed greater numbers into poverty and curtailed services, adversely impacting the education, employment and health of already disadvantaged children and families (Andrew et al., 2020; Armitage and Nellums, 2020; Karki, 2020; Morris and Fisher, 2022; OECD, 2020). The increasing marginalisation of the most vulnerable and their systematic silencing in policy, politics, and public discourse (Day et al., 2020; Lomax et al., 2021; Spray and Hunleth, 2020; Trnka, 2020; United Nations, 2020) challenged us as social researchers to consider how we might engage under-represented children, young people, and families to express their voices in contexts of spiralling inequality and hardship. In this, we were further challenged by pandemic restrictions, most particularly the limits on in-person contact and the ethical, methodological, and practical implications that this generates for methods founded on inclusion and predicated on being bodily present (Deslandes and Coutinho, 2020; Pink, 2009). This special issue attends to this ideal, exploring the potential of visual arts as a form of co-creation and ‘cultural brokerage’ (Clark, 2011), which can centre affective and embodied ways of knowing, transcending spatial distance, offering the possibility of different ways of seeing, hearing, and knowing. However, as the special issue considers, these forms of knowledge generation and dissemination are not without their challenges. Visual arts outputs are vulnerable to the interpretations of audiences and demand the epistemic responsibility of researchers to ensure that what is created and shared reflects participants’ and co-researchers’ intentions, is sensitive to alternative readings, and does not stigmatise individuals or perpetuate stigma that already exists.

The contributions

Located in the inaugural issue of ‘Beyond the Text’, each contribution provides a digital output, including animation (Lomax and Smith, 2022), comic strip (Spray et al., 2022), creative arts (Rizzo et al., 2022), film (Aissatou et al., 2022; Anas et al., 2022; Way et al., 2022), and zine (Ptolomey and Nelson, 2022; Pybus et al., 2022). Produced in collaboration with children, young people, families, and artists, these forms of representation challenge conventional understandings about what counts as knowledge, contributing new perspectives on knowledge democracy (Rowell and Long, 2017). Alongside each of the creative pieces a written text explores how each was produced, the ethical decision-making, and the wider social contexts that informed their production. By including the auteurs’ perspectives alongside each visual arts piece, our intention is to make visible the processes informing their creation, opening up a space for dialogue about the possibilities of the visual arts within participatory, including spatially distanced, social research.

A recurring theme running through these contributions is the value of the process of engagement that framed the creation of each of the visual artefacts. The focus on personal learning and sense-making reflects the aspirations of the participants and co-researchers as they sought to influence social change through the creation and dissemination of the visual

arts aimed at ‘seeing differently’ (Rizzo et al., 2022). As many of the contributors argue, these visuals serve to draw the viewer into a deeper level of engagement, offering the possibility of ‘walking alongside’ (Neale, 2013) while making evident the complexity of the multiple voices represented. In this way, this special issue draws attention to the value of visual participatory approaches both in terms of the artefacts produced and their capacity to capture the dynamic process of interaction and sense-making that forges engagement with external audiences to generate new understanding, relationships, and possibilities for social change (Lewin and Shaw, 2021).

The commitment to more democratic and sensory forms of knowledge exchange is brought in to focus in the opening contribution by Aissatou et al. (2022). Provocatively visual, auditory, and emotive in content, ‘Stories too big for a case file: Unaccompanied young people confront the hostile environment in pandemic times’, a film by Aissatou, Evangelia Prokopiou, Lucy Leon, Musharraf Abdullayeva, Mirfat, Osman, Pauline Iyambo, Rachel Rosen, Rebin, Veena Meetoo, and Zak speaks to the team’s research with unaccompanied children and young people in the UK. The authors’ argument that the ‘medium of . . . film allows us to breathe new life into truncated words and phrases on paper’ challenges conventional academic norms of relating the experiences of others to audiences through the written word. As they argue, the cinematic form, layered imagery, and complex soundscape convey and redress the violence unaccompanied children and young people feel when they enter the UK asylum system. Rather than trying to compress these ‘stories (that are) too big for casefile’ into written text, the form of production – the cacophony of voices – evokes a sensation of pressure, a way of ‘feeling’ that conveys, for audiences, the young film-makers experiences of asylum, that exceeds conventional methods of reporting.

The value of multilayered imagery and its potential to communicate the complexity and richness of lived experiences is evident in Lomax and Smith’s (2022) contribution, ‘Seeing as an act of hearing: Making visible children’s experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic through participatory animation’. A stop-start animation, ‘Our Voices’, co-produced with artists Belinda Walsh, Anna Zelasko, Finn Tanner, and anonymised children, it offers a way of seeing the multiplicity of children’s experiences through a layering of children’s creative work (music, narrative, film, photographs, and drawings). Reflecting on the co-creative process, the authors draw our attention to the importance of enabling children ‘who have been barely seen and little heard during the pandemic’ to voice their experiences, transforming creative data made by and with children into an animation that acknowledges their contributions while maintaining their anonymity. Describing their methodological and ethical concerns, Lomax and Smith reflect upon the importance of a feminist ethics of care and make visible the relational, dialogic processes of co-production with children aimed at enabling audiences to ‘see’ children’s experience in ways which avoid attributing disadvantage to particular children or identifying them.

The importance being heard resonates across many of these contributions, which deliberately seek to disrupt discourses that marginalise and instead contest the power that perpetuates social inequality. Framing this critical, change-oriented research is a commitment to a feminist ethics, centred on responsible knowing (Doucet and Mauthner, 2014). This is clearly illustrated in Anas (pseudonym) and David Cường Nguyễn’s (artist) and Caitlin Nunn’s (Anas et al., 2022) thoughtful account of the process of co-creating a digital film, ‘Calais again’, in which Anas, a young asylum seeker, visually narrates his experience of returning to France for the first time after seeking asylum in the UK.

While the research on which this film is based commenced prior to the pandemic, in the accompanying text the authors outline how the completion of the film and its dissemination took place during lockdown in the UK. Here they write about the unique affordances of online platforms for allowing youth researchers to mediate their involvement in disseminating their work. The importance of trust, dialogue, and reflexivity in ensuring that Anas experience is ‘honoured’ (Nunn, 2020) includes Nunn’s careful approach to ensuring that Anas is supported in his decision-making about how to represent himself and how much of his identity to reveal in the film and its dissemination. He is powerfully, audibly present in the film and yet as viewers we never see him. Instead, we come to know Anas through his careful selection of photographs, a process that he and the academic authors elaborate in the accompanying text. It is this ethics of care that enabled the team to respond to the disruptions in participatory arts-based research collaborations as these moved online during the coronavirus pandemic.

How to manage the process of virtual arts-based research is the focus of Julie Spray, Hannah Fechtel, and Jean Hunleth’s (Spray et al., 2022) ‘What do arts-based methods do? A story of (what is) art and online research with children during a pandemic’, a comic strip developed from their research with children aged 6 to 16 exploring children’s perspectives on their asthma in the US. To help the viewer to see and feel the messiness and disorientation of online arts-based research with children and young people in a pandemic, the comic brings together moments across the research as part of their note-taking process and illustrates why children’s drawings cannot be abstracted from the contexts that shape their content. Unsettling the notion that art is traditionally considered a finished product, the accompanying written text explores ethical practices that point us towards embodied ways of knowing through virtual space and the way the comic medium can give a body and a face to a participant while also protecting her from recognisability. They leave us questioning assumptions about what art is and does, bringing us closer to understanding what it means to be together in virtual space with young people making visible the potential for such methods to support tactile embodied ways of being in the space apart.

Creative arts, and how they can enable researchers and other audiences to see differently, is the theme of Sarah Rizzo et al.’s (2022) international contribution, ‘Young people’s perspectives on the value and meaning of art during the pandemic’. Co-authored with young people and the academic team, Rizzo et al. (2022) offer a series of visual forms, including drawing, photography, and needle craft, created and selected by young people in Singapore, Italy, Lebanon, and the UK nations. Drawing on the words of young people themselves along with a narrative from the adult researchers, the accompanying text reflects the rationale for using different visual media to explore young people’s experiences of the pandemic and why this was important for them. In common with other contributors, they explore the significance of the young people’s representations and how these images communicate to the audience to counter dominant mainstream narratives about young people, opening up a space for dialogue with audiences about the representation of young people.

Foregrounding direct experience and, specifically, the perspectives of families with children on a low income, Katie Pybus, Jean McEwan, Kayleigh Garthwaite, Maddy Power, Ruth Patrick, and Sydnie Corley (Pybus et al., 2022) produced a zine titled ‘It’s our story: parents and carers’ experiences during the pandemic’, which generates

alternative understandings about life on a low income during global crisis. Underpinned by a feminist ethics of care, the authors highlight art as a form of self-expression in order to challenge existing stigmatising narratives surrounding poverty and to advocate for social change. The zine is a powerful blend of images (drawings, collage) and written text (handwriting, cut-out script) which powerfully conveys the experience of poverty, hunger, and spiralling debt experienced by poorer families at this time. The accompanying written text outlines their commitment to a feminist ethics of care that enabled contributors to come together to make zine pages, offering opportunities for artistic expression that had been missing for participants in the midst of caring and other responsibilities exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. They argue that zines represent an effective way to share key messages from social research without ‘any third party interpretation’ and elaborate how such methods can form part of conversations with policy makers to advocate for policy change.

Laura Way, Anna Tarrant, Linzi Ladlow, Jonah York, Adam Gorzelanczyk, Dylan Brown, and Will Patterson (Way et al., 2022) contribute the penultimate piece, ‘Co-creating with young fathers: producing community informed training videos to foster more inclusive support environments’. Exploring the experience of young fatherhood, the series of videos ‘Diverse dads’ facilitates new evidence with minoritised young fathers and promotes inclusive practice and enabling representations of diverse young fathers to transform how young fathers are seen by society. The visual outputs illustrate the capabilities of a marginalised group who are frequently subject to stigma and deficit views, and the particular film selected for inclusion in this journal includes powerful interviews of young dads by young dads. Speaking directly to camera, the young fathers elaborate their experience of racial stigma and advocacy of their own children. The authors accompanying written text discusses the value of co-production and the affordances of creative, digital methods to generate and deliver research findings in the pandemic, transforming how young fathers are seen and supporting constructive discussions between young fathers, professionals, and researchers. In this piece, the young dads are identifiable. As viewers, we see and hear from young dads, generating ethical issues about the ‘letting go’ of visual research (Fink and Lomax, 2016) and attendant difficulties of managing audience responses. As the authors explain, this required reflecting carefully on the temporal and spatial dimensions of dissemination with young fathers and included imposing limits on what can be seen, by whom and over what time period.

Our final contribution, Amanda Ptolomey and Elizabeth Nelson’s (2022) ‘Prezine’, a portmanteau bringing together ‘Prezi’ a presentation tool, and ‘zine’, re-imagines moments from their creative visual research with children and young people to propose a future research landscape that ‘harnesses the digital, but still makes space for sticky, exploratory, slow, tactile methods for togetherness’. The Prezine provides a playful digital space that invites us to explore different elements of the research process. Through the interactive design of the Prezine, we encounter still and moving images (drawings, photographs, and videos) and written extracts that stimulate us to think about different ways of being sensorially immersed ‘in the room’ across digital space. As befits the aims of ‘Beyond the Text’ for socially just, accessible research, Ptolomey and Nelson’s (2022) Prezine anticipates a future where research openly and creatively explores the process of ethical co-creation through ‘methods which are inclusive, desirable, fantastical, playful . . . and create spaces for the unexpected’.

Concluding remarks

The focus of this inaugural special issue of 'Beyond the Text' is on how to support children, young people, and marginalised families to tell their stories in contexts of restrictions on face–face contact and, more broadly, to consider the implications for the integrity and rigour of participatory socially distanced and online social science research methodology. Our special issue documents the different ways that our contributors sought to manage these challenges, highlighting the role of the visual arts in supporting processes of co-production and dissemination. Collectively, the contributions make visible how arts-based methods offered opportunities for self-authoring in ways which centre embodied, material, and sensory ways of knowing (Ingold, 2013; Pink, 2009). Contrary to expectations, in socially distanced and online spaces, these methods could be both sensorial and embodied, offering the possibility for sustaining methodological innovation as well as illustrating the participatory integrity of online arts-based methods as a distinct methodological approach.

Rethinking visual arts-based methods in and beyond the pandemic, the digital and written texts together make visible the organic, exploratory process of coming to know and of being open to the unexpected. They highlight the potential of rich visual and textual ways of seeing that retain the sensory and affective qualities of experience, conveying for audiences the 'feeling of being . . . and seeing' (Morris, 2017). For the children and families whose stories have the potential to connect with audiences at a visceral level, this necessitates an ethics of 'deep care' (Nutbrown, 2010). In reflecting on the potential of the visual arts to close the space between auteur and audience, contributors' elaboration of feminist ethical praxis highlights the enduring challenge of democratising research through visual storytelling while also being aware of, and taking responsibility for, the potential harm that such representations pose to those already vulnerable to misrepresentation and stigmatising discourses now and in the future (Brady and Brown, 2013).

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