

## Learning to unlearn - Tracing Failures Within Arts-Based Participatory Research

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### Abstract

In this article I will unpack some of the emerging challenges, tensions and potentials as a becoming-researcher pushing against boundaries in a space of traditional academic expectations. I investigate entanglements between decolonial -and post humanist critiques/practices as I trace my own research practice in a process of unlearning from an individual self-reflexive approach and turn my attention to relational aspects between people, materials and discourses. The research evolves in a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary professional learning community between a teacher in visual arts in Community School of Music and Arts (CSMA), a primary school teacher and myself as a PhD-student in a Nordic doctoral program. Through our intra-actions, I learn how difficult it is not to submit to the existing framework. In the search for doing differently I move and are being moved in and out of apparently incommensurable paradigms before landing in post-oppositionality as an act of resistance.

### Keywords

arts-based participatory research, Community School of Music and Arts (CSMA), epistemological disciplining, researcher training, unlearning

## Learning to unlearn - Tracing Failures Within Arts-Based Participatory Research

In this article, I trace my own research practice in a process of unlearning from an individual self-reflexive approach striving towards a more participatory and collective approach. One of the ways in which Fig. 1 *I don't want to know where we're heading*<sup>1</sup> can be read is as a guide or an instruction to myself as a becoming researcher in methodological work. In developing and investigating my methodological practice, I turn my attention to the relational aspects between people, materials and discourses, and give them a central role in the production of knowledge.

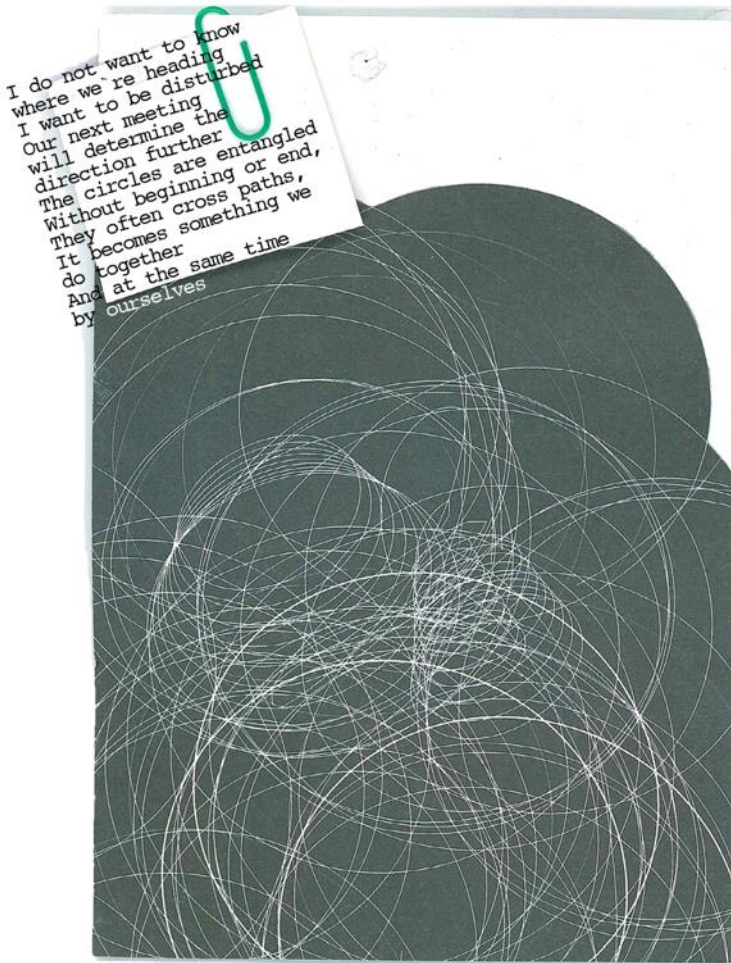


Figure 1 *I don't want to know where we're heading*

The research practice I refer to in this article takes place in a cross-sectoral collaboration between a Community School of Music and Arts (CSMA)<sup>2</sup> and a primary school and is conducted during the first two years of my PhD-fellowship. The purpose of the article is to articulate moments of unlearning. I will unpack how choice and development of methods and tools for analysis are

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<sup>1</sup> The picture in the figure is made by the artist Kim Hjortøy and is one of many cutouts used as starting points for conversations in the professional learning community.

<sup>2</sup> This form of publicly funded extracurricular arts education is organized through the local municipality and is a voluntary cultural activity available to children and young people. It is a widespread Nordic phenomenon with a specific history. For example, in Norway, the schools were formed in the 1980s from existing local music schools. I draw on the official Swedish translation of Community School of Music and Arts in this context.

closely related to both epistemological and ontological points of views as I move and find myself being moved in and out of apparently incommensurable paradigms: the qualitative and the post-qualitative; the humanist and the post-humanist; and the post-humanist and the decolonial. Educational researcher Kakali Bhattacharya (2021) has influenced me through her refusal to choose between the apparently new and the old, the new being obviously better than the old, hence reproducing new hierarchies and modes of exclusion.

Including relational aspects in research also means recognising the messiness of life which cannot be achieved in a clean-cut way. I carry with me old frustrations from my own education, which have been compounded by my experiences as a teacher in learning communities in educational settings where cognitive theories and practices of learning and knowing are highly dominant (e.g. Østern et al., 2021). These are frustrations that by no means evaporate while I undergo my researcher training. In Fig. 2, I address this in a performance lecture (Ulrichsen, 2019), where I sit with a cardboard box on my head while listening to a recording of my own repetitive citation of Socrates' notes on the marvellous things that happen between us when we talk together; a quote often cited in educational research when arguing the benefits of collective efforts towards learning.

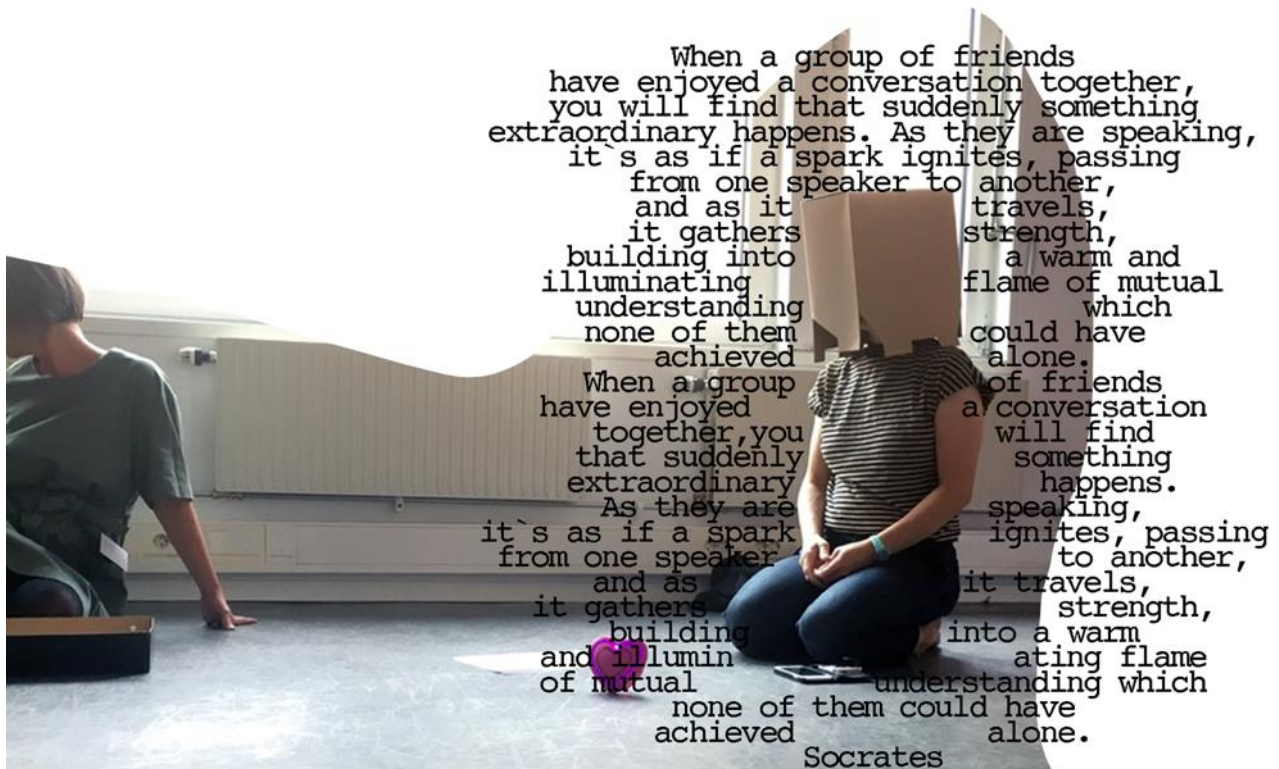


Figure 2 Trapped with Socrates' heritage of talking

Within this dominant discourse of learning and knowing, feelings of isolation, stagnation and detachment arise and grow. I put my faith in my abilities to utilize potentially disruptive practices

drawing from decades of professional work within participatory and socially engaged art (SEA)<sup>3</sup> (Eriksen 2007; New Meaning, 2012), not only to develop knowledge together with teachers within the visual art pedagogic realm of CSMA, but also within the institutional frameworks of arts-based educational research (cf. Loveless, 2015; Seppälä et al., 2021; Springgay, 2020).

In the Nordic CSMA (NCSMA), the very substance of the pupils' learning is art subjects/cultural production. However, the body of NCSMA-related research shows a striking lack of artistic or arts-based studies. Almost all the studies are carried out within a conventional academic scientific format where knowledge is produced mainly through linguistic approaches with strains to a qualitative paradigm (Øyen & Ulrichsen, 2021). In addition, the body of NCSMA research shows a striking lack of participatory and/or community-based approaches (cf. Rønningen et al. 2019). This seems to contradict the conceptualisation of the participatory approach in academia which is closely linked to concepts of participation in art towards communities (cf. Seppälä et al., 2021). Through my approach to the research, I desire engagement in inquiry that disrupts western structures of superiority of knowledge construction by turning to participation and materiality. Arts-based methods are used extensively in participatory educational research and are useful as they embrace horizontal strategies incorporating different epistemic positions (Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008; Levy, 2017; Membe, 2016, p. 37). Still the verbal linguistic dominance of knowledge production in arts educational research in general and in NCSMA specifically is obvious. In this study, verbal activity is an important tool in the interdisciplinary professional learning community (PLC), but the aim is to develop other mediating knowledge resources to link the material, the discursive, the practical and the reflexive to develop methods that emerge from the arts and the discipline being investigated (cf. Kara, 2015; Leavy, 2017; Østern et al. 2021). As a becoming researcher drawn towards participatory and collective research, I don't want to know where we're heading. I want to be disturbed. I want our next meeting to determine the direction further in the research process. I am endeavoring to achieve a decentering of my researcher self by positioning materiality, performativity and affect at the core of relations.

This article is an attempt to contribute to the development of a more organic presentation of thought processes and creative forms of expression as I move away from a conventional linear academic genre format of scientific journals to accommodate complexities and multi-dimensionality.<sup>4</sup> In the next section, I will provide the reader with the context and the material generated through an arts-based participatory research project within a cross-sectoral professional learning community. I then move on to storytelling which places me within the dominant discourse of knowing and learning respectively as a pupil in primary school (through my daughter) and as a PhD-student training to be a researcher. With this story, I intend to give

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the writings on which I base my findings are those of Dipti Desais (2017), Pablo Helgueras (2011) and Grant Kester's (2011) on participatory and socially engaged art and their connectedness to pedagogy and learning.

<sup>4</sup> This way of working with the text containing fragmented storytelling, art-making and theorization could also correspond within Gloria Anzaldúa's framework of *autohistoria-teoría* (Anzaldúa, 2015).

glimpses of how our visceral bodily reactions are entangled with the discourses that surround and inhabit us. In the next section, I will be grappling with theoretical and methodological considerations evolving when pushing against Eurocentric hallmarks of science. Because this is my individual PhD project, the framework and structures hold me back in the discourse of the researcher as the omniscient self-reflexive individual who reveals the reality *out there*: Neutral and objective, separated from material and research objects. It feels really cramped here. There's only room for me. Could immersing in agential realism and decolonising critique/practices lead me out of detachment and into a co-producing community? Will drawing attention to Bhattacharya's (2021) insistence on positioning herself in relation to a nepantla<sup>5</sup> assist me in border dwelling? I continue exploring the diffractive practice put into play in the professional learning community where we intra-act with collage and assemblage. I unpack some of the performative agents that emerged, highlighting *logs* and *risk and vulnerability* as performative agents. In the last two sections, I ponder on challenges and tensions, but also new possibilities growing out of an endeavour towards a more collective research process within the structural framing of a PhD and within arts educational discourse. Finally, I close in on notions of how acknowledging failure could be productive in the process of unlearning.

### **Pursuing Arts-based Participatory Practice in a Cross-Sectoral Professional Learning Community - Context and Research Material**

The research took place in a cross-sectoral PLC as visualized in Fig. 3. The research participants in this study were a CSMA teacher in visual arts, a primary school teacher in general science and myself as the researcher. The two teachers cooperated over a period of 4 months where the goal was to explore, develop and implement co-teaching practices. The pupils were at intermediate level and the primary school teacher was their class teacher. Collaboration between the two types of school was usually structured in a way that the teacher in a given class at the primary school invited the CSMA-based one with regard to the specific needs of the class at that point. The time span for the collaboration would usually consist of 6 two-hour sessions.

My intervention in this structure was that the three of us met regularly at the beginning of the collaboration, after each teaching session and after 4 months when all the teaching sessions had been completed. Each meeting lasted about 45-60 minutes. I named our joint learning space a diffractive practice. In this practice, different knowledge resources were explored and developed. For example, we would use multiple images as a starting point in our conversations (Fig. 4) where distinctive fields of knowledge were put into play and tensions between the different fields emerged. Fig. 1, *I don't want to know where we are heading*, emerged from one of the initial meetings when we had conversations on motivation and aims for the research project while intra-

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<sup>5</sup> Nepantla is a concept used in Chicano and Latino anthropology, social commentary, criticism, literature and art. It represents a concept of in-between-ness and movement in and out of multiple worlds (Anzaldúa, 2015).

acting with images.

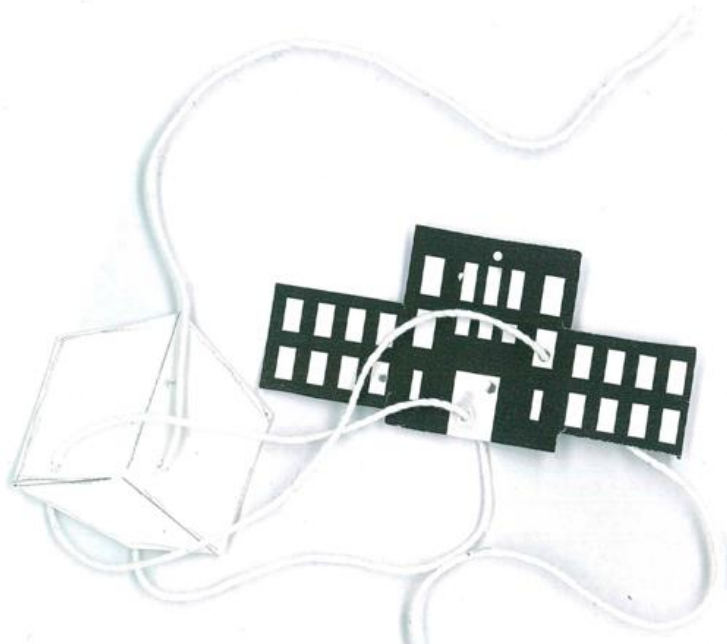


Figure 3. Entering collaboration in a cross-sectoral field



Figure 4. A starting point for a conversation

The material was generated through notes and memos from informal conversations, phone calls and formal meetings. I made video and audio recordings of the practice and documented unsystematically with photography (when I remembered and found it natural to do so). I observed the teaching practice and assisted the teachers in class when necessary. The intention with my presence was to be able to draw on what had happened in the classroom during our diffractive practice. A collective virtual space on Messenger was also a space to generate material. As

material, I also include my own experiences of challenges, resistance and hopes as a becoming researcher disciplined into the scientifically epistemic norms of the academy.

My unlearning is inseparable and intertwined with the research participants' agencies. However, in this article I become my own research subject as I draw attention to how education has trained my own body in Eurocentrism (cf. Eriksen, 2022) and how Eurocentrism works and reproduces itself through my attempts to do collaborative and participatory research within the existing framework of the doctoral program of which I am part. In another visual essay, *The Material Touch: cross sectional and interdisciplinary co-production of knowledge*, I draw nearer to the participants, their agencies, motivation and potential benefits in our practice whilst also stepping into the background without losing sight of the mutual influence we have on each other in the development of the practice.

## The Epistemological Disciplining of a Becoming Researcher within the Eurocentric Academy

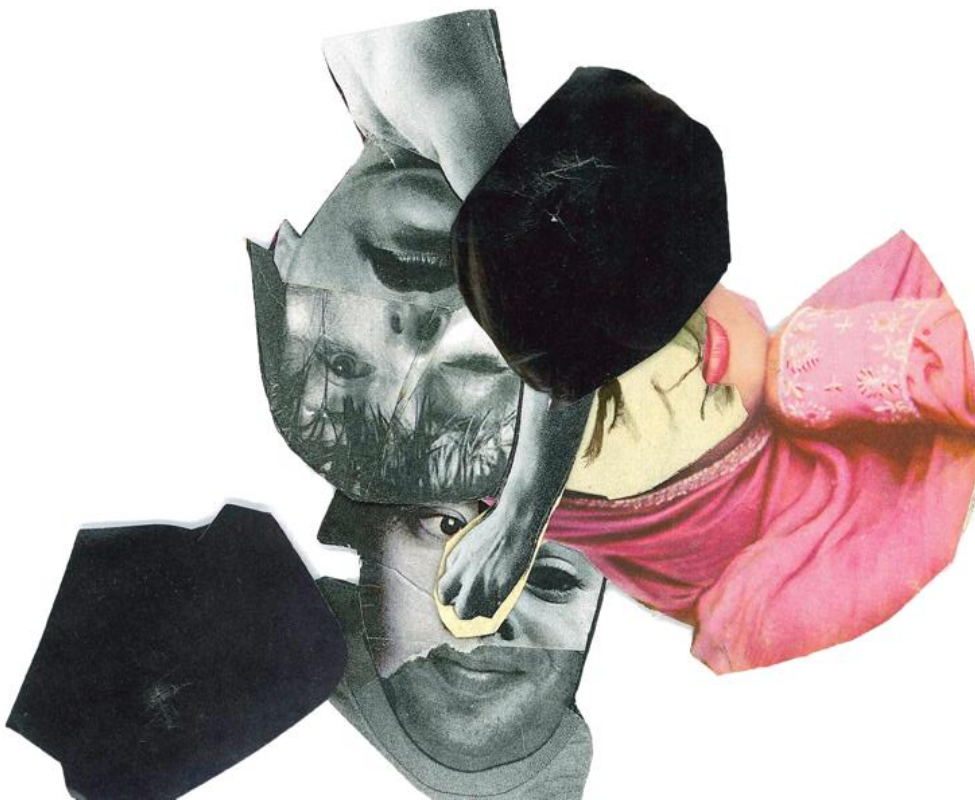
*I felt it all over my body. Justified and confirmed. The text when it hits the right place, at the right time. The relief when another person articulates in words what I myself do not yet know that I know. After the first reading, the texts have long been at the top of the piles. They have been waiting for me to start relating, putting them into context with my work. Will the texts save me? My project? All this resistance to start, I know where it comes from.*

*Yesterday on the way home with my 10-year-old from football. A long-awaited five minutes for ourselves in the car without younger siblings interrupting. I ask if there is something she wants me to bring up in the meeting with her teacher the next day. She replies: I'm nervous, what if I find out I'm wrong? I hesitate, not really knowing what to answer: is this something you feel every day in school? She: Hmmm, we have such difficult national tests. I dread them. They will compare results and see which school is best and worst. Everyone gets to know it. What if I ruin things for the others?*

*And of course, I recognize myself. Here it begins. With the same anxiety in our bodies, we head for our tasks the next morning. My daughter to school. Me to my work as a PhD fellow with the goal of moving forward with this article. But how should I (and my daughter) be able to explore - to understand, to learn, if I (we) are to develop knowledge with this knot in our solar plexus. Of course, it is counter-productive, the way my inherited view of learning and knowledge production inhabits me. I need to unlearn. (Ulrichsen, 2017, memo)*

In my opinion, the following scenario is recognizable to many in their training as becoming researchers: I spent the first half year of my fellowship on further developing a project plan. I

needed to generate some empirical data. This empirical material is out there somewhere. From within my office, I alone refine ideas on how to co-create empirical material with research participants that do not yet exist. My supervisor provides constructive feedback, but it is my sole responsibility to drive the process forward so that it appears so well planned and detailed that it is approved in the doctoral program. I am in dialogue with potential research participants in the project, but before starting to generate empirical data, I have immersed myself deep into the thought processes and planning, and my intentions work uninhibitedly. I want to be disturbed, longing for collaborative expansion as articulated in Fig. 5, but at the top of the educational chain, the supreme and ultimate form of knowledge occurs alone (Finbog, 2020). In compulsory courses, co-production is not permitted, and the assessment criteria are deeply rooted in views of knowledge production as individual activity. If, may God forbid, I co-write, I must document and extract my individual contribution.



*Figure 5. Notions of collective knowledge production*

The fact that it might be a collective effort, where the different individual contributions are not possible to trace, is not an option. I can write in a footnote that the authors contribute in an equal manner, but in the neo-liberal system where you publish or perish the footnote remains just as irrelevant as a footnote. As a PhD-student in an educational institution in Norway, I step into the academy and am socialized into Eurocentric and violent epistemic traditions of knowledge production (Patel, 2015). These form an institutional framework where science and knowledge are built on the legacy of the Cartesian rational enlightenment, thereby also distorting other kinds of



knowledge<sup>6</sup> excluding them as outside the realm of common sense (cf. Spivak, 1988). Knowledge and science are developed through verbal and written language, not materiality; through individual activity, not collective efforts; through keeping a distance, not involvement; through reason, not affect.

In today's Nordic context, the consequences of a historical and contemporary Eurocentricity of knowledge production is expressed in different ways. For example, when I search for my foremothers in my grandparents', my parents' and my personal education path, I can see omissions. Norwegianization has in many ways eradicated Coastal Sámi communities/culture from the Nordic narrative of contemporary and historical indigenous peoples (cf. Finbog, 2020). I cast a glance at the research of my own discipline of visual art and arts and crafts, which indicates that teaching practices are dominated by individual activity focused on expression through objects which are to be exhibited (Klungland, 2021; Øyen & Ulrichsen, 2021). In the apparently neutral practice of art didactics in everyday life at school, modernity/coloniality are continued as organisational principles through an ongoing reconstruction of the subject as the spectator (cf. Vázquez, 2020). Modern aesthetics founded on Enlightenment logic conserve a normative canon which disregards and rejects other forms of artistic practice as being proper and true art forms (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Vázquez, 2020). I am thinking about the film *We're Already Here* (my translation) (Lundestad Joof, 2018) where Fadlabi, a visual artist says:

I think there is a lie in art history, in generated terminology such as *primitivism*, for example, where the white man was the genius who saw the jewels that those 'primitive' people could make, you know, like he is the hero (laughing). Like Picasso and Modigliani. They were not capable of seeing African artists as equals. They just couldn't.

The lies Fadlabi brings to the surface linger while I read a textbook<sup>7</sup> about how the researcher's own emotions play their role in qualitative analyses (Nilssen, 2012, p. 32)

[The researcher] describes how field work in Africa contributed to learning something about dignity and goodness, but also something about the feeling of discomfort. The latter was linked to dilemmas linked to power and powerlessness. For example, she could feel irritation and powerlessness in how appallingly women were treated, and how difficult it was to say something or intervene.

The depiction of all men throughout Africa does not seem to require a specification of context in the form of country, region or socio-economic class affiliation. Yet another image is added to the

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<sup>6</sup>Knowledge deriving from non-white, non-European, non-male and indigenous bodies or knowledge deriving from collective and/or performative approaches.

<sup>7</sup> The book is part of the curriculum at NTNU in 2021-22.

cultural archive (Said, 2000) which I carry within me and use to filter the reading of the evaluation report I find in my in-box. In the report about The Norwegian National Research School in Teacher Education (NAFOL) (Schwack, et al., 2021), the question of recruitment to the research school is linked to gender, age distribution, institution affiliation and professional background. Neither origin nor racialisation is considered to be a category. The negative representation<sup>8</sup>, which is omitted by the evaluation report when recruitment is to be charted confirms the colour blindness which characterises the training of researchers. Alternatively, expressed in the terms of Gloria Wekker, the social and cultural anthropologist: what we see is White innocence (Wekker 2016); as the social paradox of the denial of racial discrimination and historical and contemporary colonial violence. The *right not to know* results in “perpetuating and perpetuated differences in educational achievements among populations along racial and ethnic lines” as educational researcher Leigh Patel puts it (2015, p. 15). Is it our Nordic Exceptionalism (cf. Eriksen et al., 2020; Ulrichsen et al., 2021) that makes it so hard to take on board that the whiteness of the doctoral programs in Norwegian teacher training should be addressed in relation to durable patterns of inequity<sup>9</sup>?

I turn to decolonial critiques of how science and academic knowledge reproduce western epistemologies, colonial power relations and Eurocentric forms of knowledge through the claim of value-free science. I try to push against boundaries in a space of conventional academic expectations, boundaries that, of course, were an integral part of me before entering the academy and recognizable in my daughter’s fear of making mistakes in her 5th grade: the fear of not being good enough, the fear of not being able to provide the right answer when the expert (as in the teacher or the professor) asks.

## Humanist Entanglements - Grappling with Decoloniality, Critical Post-Humanism and Arts-Based Research

Patel turns her attention “to the processes used in doctoral programs as these programs function as sites of apprenticeship, transparently and opaquely communicating the social, physical, and ethical values of academic educational research” (2015, p. 5). While adapting to the existing framework that constitutes the researcher education in my institution, manifested by and through western structures of knowledge construction, I struggle with the heritage from the Cartesian enlightenment. Both post-humanism and decolonial theory critique the humanist ideal of ‘Man’ which brings all humans into the same framework by directly and indirectly setting an archetype of the human subject, based on homogeneity and essentialisation generalisations (cf. Braidotti, 2019, p. 2; Vázquez, 2020). However, delinking ourselves from the humanist ideal of ‘Man’ as the

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<sup>8</sup> Until 2018, it was possible to view all of the ten year groups being trained on NAFOL’s website. Following the implementation of GDPR in 2018, it was no longer possible to view images of year groups that were no longer active. A quick search before this indicated an overwhelmingly white troupe of emerging researchers.

<sup>9</sup> Studies in England shows that black, Asian and minoritised students are shunning PhDs because they don’t feel like they belong in academia [Read more here.](#)

universal measure is harder than we might think, as Bhattacharya (2021) argues anything post does not avoid being created out of humanism/qualitative research/modernity as a prerequisite and the insisting of the post creates new universalist dichotomies. I base my ideas on Patel's way of understanding decoloniality as she writes:

(...) decolonial should always address material changes. However, I also address decolonial moves that become available once anticolonial stances are enacted. This is a subtle yet important distinction – anticolonial and decolonial praxis is not consecutive, but to decolonise does require the apprehension and unsettling of coloniality (...) A text can make visible coloniality but it does not, in itself, shift material relations among human beings, including the connections to land (land here meaning land, air, water, and space) (...) Any text and practice that aspires to be decolonial must be seen as a globally shared responsibility that is necessary but insufficient, as mapping these genealogies does not directly address the repatriation of land and alterations to material conditions (2015, p. 7).

To me this also resonates with the way indigenous political scientist Rauna Kuokkanen (2010) argues that interventions in processes of decolonisation cannot be merely theoretical, but need to be performed in material and social relationality with bodies of resistance. The similarities between the decolonial and critical post-humanist strains being their framing of non-human agency as vital; their concepts of inquiry producing modes of being not just representation of being; their emphasis on the ethics of inquiry as opposed to the ideal of the truth, and an emphasis on ethical relations (Mackinlay, 2016; Rosiek et al. 2020; Sousa & Pessoa, 2019). Bhattacharya describes how she as a nepantla “moves in and out of multiple worldviews” through movement, shuttling, and liminalities finds transformation (2009, p. 179). At the same time, she notes how this makes her an unreliable narrator as you are supposed to accept dichotomies devised, choose sides and thereby maintain the hierarchy and power structures in academia.

While Bhattacharya “goes in exile from post-qual approaches” (2021, p. 179) I stay in this messy terrain. As I manoeuvre between apparently incommensurable paradigms I try, in Fig. 6, to articulate how a methodological trajectory feels as opposed to when I am expected to work with methods as if they are a recipe or a standardized procedure to be performed. To build a research practice that pushes against the fact that individual cognition dominates knowledge production, I draw on diffractive practices and analysis with strains to agential realism (cf. Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017; Lenz Taguchi & Palmer, 2013) and a rejection of methodology and methods (St. Pierre,

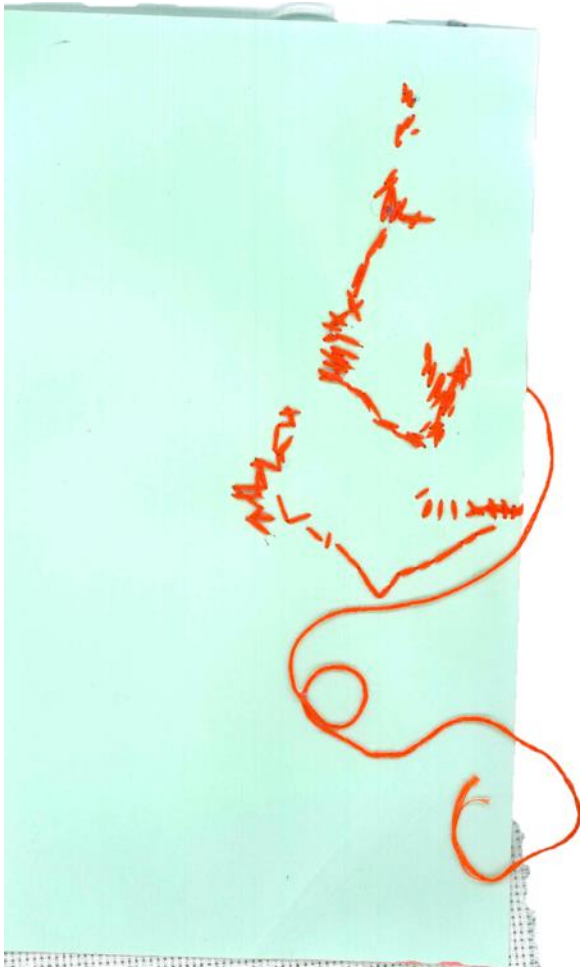


Figure 6 A methodological trajectory

2021). I immerse in theories and practices of decoloniality (cf. Walsh, 2018) and try to get them under skin, well aware of the rejection of the post-humanist framework due to how it centres new Anglo-American universalisms once again<sup>10</sup> (cf. Mignolo, 2018; Vasques, 2020). I head for research-creation<sup>11</sup> (Springgay, 2021), but end up with arts-based participatory methods bouncing in between a qualitative paradigm and a performative paradigm (e.g. Østern et. al, 2021).

### **In and Out of Reflexivity and Diffraction; Individuality and Collectively; Language and Materiality**

Choices of methods and tools for analysing are closely linked to both epistemological and ontological points of view (Bhattacharya, 2021; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Mignolo, 2011; Patel, 2015; Vasques, 2020; Walsh, 2018).

In this study, I move and find myself being moved towards a view of knowledge where a monistic perspective is challenged and the dualistic distinctions between body and thought, mind and matter, nature and culture is explored and negotiated. I turn my attention to materials and non-human entities and put them in the forefront in the development of knowledge. I want to emphasize the dynamic and relational aspects of the research process. The methods that I, as a researcher, use to generate and analyse research material develop in mutual, repetitive and alternating influences with relational conditions. For example, the form and materiality of the potential content of the research participants' logs will be important when they are invited to produce their logs, as will who the logs are produced for and shared with (researcher or also between research participants). The form and address of the log will in this perspective reinforce different discourses on knowledge which have ethical implications (e.g. Bozalek & Zembylas,

<sup>10</sup> Bhattacharya's quote on "how erasures of colonizing onto-epistemologies in qualitative inquiry, culminating in the current moment of post-qualitative research (p.179, 2021)" lingers in my mind.

<sup>11</sup> Research-creation is described as an experimental practice in the intersection between art practice, theoretical concepts, and research. It is attuned around processes rather than the communication of outputs or products. Usually, trans-disciplinary striving for hybrid forms of practice between the arts and science (see more <https://thepedagogicalimpulse.com/research-methodologies/>).

2017).

I draw upon how Elizabeth Mackinlay (2016), Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2012), Patel (2015) and Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas (2017) utilize Karen Barad's (2007) theories on the entanglement of ideas, people, and material conditions. Learning from an agential realist perspective means that learning happens all the time where you are, and the process is described as a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the world: the people you touch and are touched by, things, space, architecture and time (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 43). Diffraction is used as a term both to describe what goes on in a practice and as a term that enables new practice. By turning to diffraction, transcending the mirroring effect that lies implicit in the concept of reflection is sought and thus the danger of there only being reproduction of already existing practices, in this case both teaching practices and research practices. Diffraction draws attention to opportunities and potentials in intra-action<sup>12</sup> that disrupt and challenge the taken-for-granted or the common sense, leading me as a researcher out of preconception and creating openings to new possibilities and practices. How can diffraction steer me into creating reality instead of reflecting on it?

To learn diffractively, we had to unlearn our drive to engage in a reflective process focused on the self or searching for interpretations, as this suppressed the alternative possibilities that we might have come up with opening up to the ontology of learning – e.g. paying attention to the entangling of bodies, ideas, flows and intensities generated by our collaboration (...) (Bozalek & Zembylas, p. 123, 2017)

By working diffractively, the habit of giving the reflexive self the constitutive force in the development of knowledge is resisted, but instead strives towards ways to open up to how self and others (social and material elements) are intertwined in the explorative co-production of knowledge in our PLC. Lenz Taguchi points out how both humans and non-human materiality gain agency when they enter into relationships with others; people, discourses and materiality become productive and performative agents. That something/someone works as a performative agent is about something/someone having an effect on something/someone in a meeting (2012, p. 15). Pen and paper or images as shown in Fig. 4 for example, will invite the research participants to engage in different ways. The foundations of a diffractive approach “(...) shout and roar at us to be responsive and to take responsibility for our knowledge-making praxis” (Mackinlay, 2016, p. 218). Following Mackinlay's words, diffraction could be explored as an alternative critical practice that could potentially move us towards the unsettling work that Kuokkanen (2010), Pirjo Virtanen et al. (2021) and Patel (2015) demand in relation to getting closer to decoloniality in education. Both Patel and Mackinlay (2016) highlight the interfering nature of Barad's agential realism as a potential way to disrupt and push back at colonial categories and knowledge systems. I am still

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<sup>12</sup> The term is used by Barad (2007) to call attention to the co-constitutive nature of knowledge and research.

hesitant due to my fear of dirtying my hands even more, “always acutely aware of the potential of posthuman thinking to become too abstract, which can then take on characteristics of hegemonic thinking that transcend situated reality” (Strom et al., p. 9, 2019) but I get swept away by Patel’s (2015) way of incorporating intra-action in her theocratizations.

## Touching Materiality and Making the Familiar Unknown

In this study, I explored how conversations and meaning-making can be supported and intensified by artefacts and visual images. Intra-acting with materiality, is an integral part of the knowledge production that takes place in our PLC, and also in my individual exploration. In a material and discursive analysis apparatus, both matter and words are incorporated. For the research participants and for the researcher alike, arts-based methods hold potential for lowering hierarchies, increasing multivocality and developing new and more transparent forms of participatory research and interventions in the field (Seppälä et al., 2021, p. 3).

### Something Emerges in a Messy Terrain

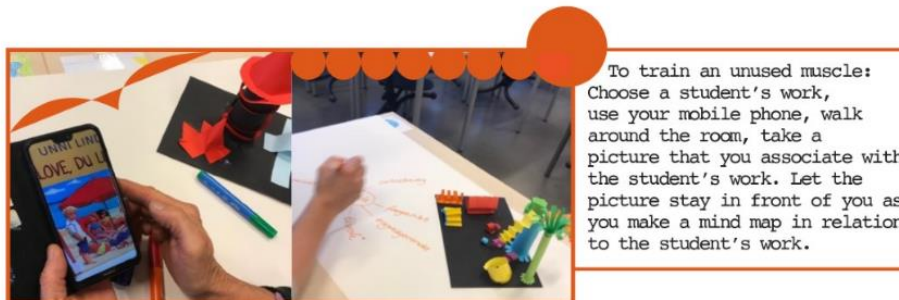


Figure 7 Emerging diffractive practice of learning together

I will further provide glimpses of how we explored a diffractive practice and analysis, as shown in Fig. 7<sup>13</sup>. The CSMA teacher described how our practice had direct transfer value in her way of thinking about and planning the teaching sessions. The practice supported her in exploring and challenging her teaching practice, which she initially found frustrating because of her concern about ensuring results that pupils, teachers and parents can recognize and applaud as art objects. During our work, the CSMA teacher moved towards a process-oriented, relational and exploratory form of teaching practice. For the primary teacher who was not trained in working or communicating through art conventions, the practice also created feelings of alienation. This difference could be perceived as a problem or as a fundamental driving force and a significant resource in the process of collaborative learning and co-construction of knowledge.

Intra-acting with materiality expanded the space for knowing and deepened both the research participants' and my perspectives as a researcher (Ulrichsen & Angelo, 2019). Collage and assemblage were intertwined in practice and analysis at all stages of the process, and contributed to deepening relational conditions through utilizing presence, different interpretations and ambiguity (cf. Scotti & Chilton, 2017; Ulrichsen et al., 2021). Sensitive topics difficult to open up to and articulate through written or verbally based methods were brought into the space and shown the potential to evoke an emphatic understanding of the ways in which other people experience their worlds (cf. Eriksen et al. 2020; Kara, 2015, p. 83-84; Levy, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Seppälä et al., 2021; Ulrichsen, 2018). This approach could also be described as a way of making the familiar unknown (Manney, 2010).

In the process of unlearning as a becoming researcher, intra-action with materiality was also integral and significant. I used collage and animation in my individual exploration of phenomena that appeared important at the different stages of the research. For example, in Fig. 3, I articulated how the cross-sectoral collaboration first appeared to me when encountering it, by animating a drawing of a white cube that wraps itself in and out of a graphic picture of a school. The white cube could point towards NCSMA's struggles with their strong anchoring in a modernist doxa (cf. Øyen & Ulrichsen, 2021) and the two-dimensional building could express something about practices dominated by cognitive approaches to learning and knowing and thereby a lack of multi-dimensionality. In Fig 5, I made attempts to manifest how the collaboration and co-production of knowledge emerge as bodily phenomena when placing materiality, performativity and relationality in the forefront.

The generated material pointed in many different directions, and I sought to create meaning by searching for connections between the documentation from practice (photo, video, sound recording) and the written and visual material I have created. In the process of cutting in the material, led by my problem area, several performative agents emerged. I named these

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<sup>13</sup> The graphic design of Fig. 7 is done by artist/graphic designer Jacky Kuo.

performative agents: time and positionality; risk and vulnerability; log; student work; assemblage and collage and the modernist doxa (Ulrichsen, 2019). I will further elaborate on the emergence of logs, and risk and vulnerability as two of these performative agents.

### Between Individual Self-Reflexive Logs and Dialogic Intra-Active Diffractive Logs

I try to steer the research participants' logs towards arts-based practice, such as selecting an object and making a mind map around it (Fig. 8). Am I asking for too much? Demanding of them something for which I didn't provide the basis. For the primary school teacher who is not familiar with working with art conventions in this way, it is perceived as a little strange: "I didn't get the instruction," she comments when I ask why they have not responded by logs. And the CSMA teacher "feels empty and can't do the homework" as she writes in an email. When they do not answer, I have to ask myself, Why does the log guide seem unmotivating to the research participants? What function should the log have? Should they be pedagogical tools for developing teaching practice together? Or a means to generate material so that I can make interpretations of the material?

<p><b>Poetic log</b>                  Choose 2 objects that you associate with potentials/challenges in the collaboration.                  Try to make quick choices, associate freely and trust your intuition.</p>
<p>Create a mind map around the objects as you reflect on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you want/hope the other teacher will bring into the development of your co-created teaching practice (something that you yourself may not be able to)?</li> <li>2. What could be challenging for you personally in a collaboration like this?</li> </ol>

Table 1 Log as a performative agent

I read how Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) explore and describe how a collective diffractive method, used in their reading group meetings, differs from traditional logs, which require an individual perspective rather than an intra-active group. They point out how monological self-reflexive logs create distance from the group instead of creating an understanding that the participants are part of and intertwined in everything that happens in the group and between the members and the material world. By working with a diffractive method, the researchers try to open up so that it is not the (reflexive) self that becomes the constitutive force, but the self and others (social and material elements), intertwined in different ways. The authors are interested in how to transform the reflexive log into dialogic intra-active diffractive logs where ideas, bodies and texts meet and form disturbances that are important, and that build on each other and thereby create new productive visions. The leading questions that follow reflexive logs correspond, according to Bozalek and Zembylas, with a judgemental framework while diffraction corresponds with ethics, "Whereas morality judges against an ideal and finds each person wanting, ethics asks rather what is it to be this?" (p. 123). My conclusion is that the address of the logs must be changed to have a function in collaborative learning. If the research participants continue to send the log to me, we reproduce a methodological practice where the research participants' and the researcher's



reflexive selves are centred - both as sender and recipient. The logs should instead play a role in the development of a collective sharing space. Without me being aware of it, my choices of log as a tool for generating material, and the shaping of the log, are rooted in the epistemology from which I am trying to unravel. How can I disrupt this individually-centred view of learning and knowing that inhabits me? By focusing on the example with self-reflexive logs versus the example with dialogic intra-active diffractive logs, Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) show how the reflexive process can become part of a diffractive apparatus. The reflexive process assumes that the human agent works alone and intentionally; the diffraction process instead recognizes that individual agents are intertwined with other agents. Again, I'm back to my position as a becoming researcher, alone with my PhD project. I carefully try, and then try again, to build a diffractive practice together with the research participants. We leave the individual logs behind and create a collective space on Messenger where we intra-act with each other's ideas, questions and logistics in planning, exploring and evaluating the teaching practice.

### **Risk and Vulnerability as a Driving Force**

In literature on arts-based research, much has been written about risk both as a consequence and as a driving force (Greer & Blair, 2018; Kara, 2015; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2017). Where risk is often linked to the open, not knowing, lack of control (cf. Anundsen & Illeris, 2019) attention is to a lesser extent, turned to what it means for the individual researcher's body and consciousness to put herself in a state of risk. Within performative arts-based participatory research, it is considered important that the practitioner turns her attention to the feelings of resistance, anxiety and stress, and critically reflects on these moments when they arise in the various practices (cf. Bhattacharya, 2016). I do not have to hide the vulnerability and the anxiety that arises from stepping into the messy terrain. They are all important and integral parts of the process of unlearning (Sjøvoll et al., 2020). By focusing on specific and intense experiences and linking them with a cultural context, they are part of socio-material discourses. To highlight the researcher's subjectivity as a significant part of the apparatus, has ethical implications because it follows a rationale that I as a researcher am not neutral nor separate from the matter, discourses, materiality, practices and humans with which my research is entangled.

### **Inviting the Research Participants into the Process of Analysing and Expecting a Fairy-Tale to Unfold**

Research carried out in close interaction with people, makes the process more dynamic, risky and unpredictable for me as a researcher. It corresponds with an epistemic rationality where the researcher, the research participants and the generated material are entangled and mutually have an effect on each other in the co-construction of knowledge and meaning. However, simply inviting the research participant into the analysis is not sufficient. Good intentions alone (e.g. Ulrichsen et al., 2021) do not destabilise power imbalance and hierarchies between researcher and the research participants as long as the invitation is not accompanied with resources. To be able to invest in a

process of designing and analysing, the research participant needs time. The research participants I worked with were not provided with extra resources or released from other tasks expected of them during their working day. As Kara writes

(...) because a transformative research framework is designed to be more ethical than top-down research frameworks, it may help all concerned to address power imbalances and differences within the research project, but doing so will still take time and effort above and beyond that needed for core research tasks (...) Practicalities get in the way, because full participation involves a great deal of investment in support, training and inclusion (2015, p. 46).

This resonates with challenges I met in this study. The discourse on arts-based participatory research exposes naïve and romantic approaches to terms such as participants as co-researchers, non-hierarchical relationships, people's pedagogy, public scholarship, equal collaboration with non-academic participants and co-constructing knowledge (Levy, 2017, p. 12). As a partner in this romantic relationship, I desire the consequences that are promised as an outcome when putting the terms to work and I use them extensively myself. This is something we do together (Fig. 1). The same desire makes it difficult for me to see what's going on. Despite the fact that cultural production and creativity is morally neutral, being as applicable to crime as to good works (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Kara, 2015, p. 39, Seppälä et al. 2021), it's as if within the discourse of arts-based research the belief is that the research participant can transform herself with the magic of a unicorn, and the researcher somehow setting the stage, shedding the light of the rainbow over the process – the rainbow made purely from the researchers' good intentions. As Kara states, "Participatory frameworks may seem like a marvellous idea to the researcher, but considerably less marvellous to the participants, who have much less to gain. It's not always the case that more participation automatically leads to greater inclusion and empowerment of participants" (2015, p. 46). This tendency towards advocacy is critical because within this discourse, arts-based research presents itself as less stained with power imbalance and hierarchy.

### **Acknowledging Failure as a Move beyond Good Intentions**

I have striven to unlearn from an ontology, philosophy of science and epistemology based on cognitive learning theories that inhabit both me as a becoming researcher in the presence and recognized in my daughter's anxiety in primary school. I longed for another approach to learning without frantically, and with my heart in my throat, looking for the right answer, that is what the expert asks for and already knows. I followed my intuition and delved into academic predecessors who drew me in as I stumbled in and out of different onto-epistemologies, and just like Bhattacharya, I ended "up in a hybridized space of traditional and disruptive approaches to inquiry" (2021, p. 180). The stance of the post-oppositional (Keating, 2012) offered me a source of resistance as I engaged in an emerging arts-based and diffractive practice to preserve multi-dimensionality. I

aimed for a collective approach where the research participants could emerge as true co-researchers. I didn't want to know where we were heading. I resisted designing a methodological recipe for a fixed and stable mode of inquiry predetermined by me alone in advance. I wanted to be disturbed. Moments of joy, community, vulnerability, risk and alienation emerged.

We touched upon collective creation, but the framework of my research education in a neo-liberal institution pulled me back into the fold. I didn't use the time required to build good relations either between institutions, people or practices. As a becoming researcher, I became stuck in the structure of knowledge construction that favours the presupposed autonomous, individual knowledge production (e.g. Patel, 2015). I kept in control. Through our intra-actions, I learned how difficult it is not to submit to the existing framework. However, our collective exploration provides me with essential knowledge on developing participatory arts-based research. Acknowledging failure, not tucking away "traces of dirt, human toil, crookedness and suffering" but mentioning it again and again "can offer us the space we need to continue to think, feel, make and care" and thereby generating different practices (Sjøvoll, et al. 2020, p. 6). In becoming a researcher, I utilize my failures learning to unlearn in order to relearn (Keskitalo, 2019). With the efforts and the investment of the research participants, I get the chance to interrogate my positionality and privilege within the Eurocentric academy. I have highlighted transformative potentials, challenges, tensions and ethical concerns as I take a small step in the direction of unlearning whilst attempting to engage in unruly diffractive and decolonial behaviour moving in and out of multiple paradigms and with Bhattacharya (2021) resisting indoctrination in anyone.

Patel states that the decolonialisation of educational research involves working with content, systems and representation (2015). As activist, researcher and educator Zahra Bayati writes when she contextualises the approach in the Nordic teacher training:

(...) in spite of the strong traditional, nationalist and colonial discourses and structures that exist – and which benefit the existing systems – there are many agents willing to embark on the transcending approach (...) stakeholders from teacher training call for conscious system-wide, progressive structural changes. This with the goal of changing the unequal conditions of study and creating a multi-dimensional, or with another word cosmopolitan, learning environment where the many can identify their knowledge interests in the contemporary era of globalization. (Bayati, 2014, p. 225)

In this article, I mainly touch upon the legacy from Westernised and Eurocentricised knowledge production with regard to the favouring of individual and language based-learning activities. I address if and how "methods which say no to working alone"<sup>14</sup> and arts-based methods which could

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<sup>14</sup>I borrowed the quote from an invitation to *the Spring Meeting, 2021*, where artists such as Nikil Vettukattil together with others invites participants to make inquiries into de-individualised and collective modes of acting, making and being together in, through, and past the arts.

potentially contribute to decolonial approaches, epistemologically and methodologically. This, as an isolated approach by no means has an automatic transfer effect in transgressing to a decolonialisation of educational systems in general and art pedagogies more specifically (Seppälä et al., 2021). To be able to move from monocultural to pluralistic multi-dimensional education we need to work from within pluralist proximity at all levels, especially in spaces where decisions are made. But these are other stories to be told, not by me alone, but as a collective endeavour (cf. Eriksen et al., 2020; Ulrichsen et al., 2021).

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