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## CONSTRUCTING EDUCATIONAL COMMONS: FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES FROM RESEARCH TO PRAXIS

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyse the methodological process for constructing and researching educational commons in a non-formal education context from a feminist perspective. Between March 2022 and March 2023, we developed two simultaneous case studies in two Andalusian cities. The cases concerned after school artistic workshops in partnership with third-sector organisations that carry out school support and leisure activities with young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The proposal included different critical methodologies for creating 'smooth' spaces for reflection, artistic doing, education and research. In doing so, caring, sharing and cooperating played a central role. In this paper we reflect on this process. We propose that the articulation between feminist methodologies and the philosophy of the educational commons challenges the limits between research and practice, reformulating the researcher-educator relation and developing the communing practices. This experience hacks the traditional roles of researchers and educators, not only concerning the children and young people with whom we developed artistic workshops but also the procedures and knowledge generation process that the adults put into practice at different stages of the case studies.

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## Introduction

The H2020 project *Smooth Educational Spaces, passing through Enclosures and Reversing Inequalities*, intends to introduce the emergent paradigm of the ‘commons’ as an alternative value and action system in education for children and young people. The project involves institutions from seven European countries, including the University of Cádiz (UCA) in the South of Spain. The UCA working group developed case studies in two Andalusian cities, Seville and Jerez de la Frontera. The cases concerned afterschool artistic workshops in partnership with third-sector organisations carrying out school support and leisure activities with young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The proposal included different critical methodologies for creating ‘smooth’ spaces for reflection, artistic doing, education and research. In doing so, the processes of caring, sharing and cooperating played a central role.

In this paper, we describe the methodological process for constructing and researching educational commons in a non-formal education context from a feminist perspective. Specifically, we analyse how the articulation between feminist methodologies and the philosophy of the educational commons challenges the limits between practice and research, proposing reforming the teaching-educational practice and the researching-study practices around the educational commons. This proposal hacked the traditional roles of researchers and educators, not only concerning the students with whom they develop educational communing practice but also to the knowledge, initial agreements and procedures between the adult team at the different stages of the process.

The paper is structured in four sections to address these issues, including this introduction. The next section describes our case studies and research tools. Following that, we approach feminist epistemologies and methodologies grounds. In the discussion and conclusion section, we reflect on how the relationship developed during the implementation of the case studies reflects our commitment to feminist research practices.

### Agüita-Smooth cases

Agüita afterschool Workshops took place weekly between March 2022 and March 2023 in two disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Seville (on Mondays) and Jerez de la Frontera (on Wednesdays). The young participants, aged 10 to 17, were recruited by the social organisations Save the Children in Seville and CEAIN-South Zone Community Project in Jerez de la Frontera (Cadiz). Some of these children and young people were already participating in education and children participation programs and networks run by this organisation, which also provided the facilities

for the workshop and involved staff in the project. Parallel to this, another third party was responsible for the design and direct implementation of the workshops: Tekeando. This women's association promotes context-dependent collaborative processes and practices based on action art, critical pedagogies, and technologies for communication, organisation, and action. As a result of this complex schema, the complete adult team in the case studies involved three university researchers (participant observers of the practice), two artist-educators of Tekeando and a total of 9 social workers, educators and coordinators of the other third parties (StC and CEAIN-South Zone Community Process).

The workshop followed the principles and pedagogical methodologies of the educational commons established by the Smooth Project guidelines. UCA team developed the case studies into rounds, the first from March to June 2022 and the second from November 2022 to March 2023. This two-round design and development allow the team to have a mid-term break to evaluate and reflect on the implementation of the first term of workshops and reformulate and include some adjustments for the second round.

The project includes a variety of data collection tools, including the diversity of voices and meaning-making, being the most important:

- Ethnographic and collaborative field diary. Although [AUTHOR 3 ANONIMISED] was the principal author of this document, it was open to the other two authors of this paper to complete and complement her narrative and Tekeando educators.
- Pedagogical documentation. The researchers, the educators and the young people collect photographs, videos and audio during the sessions. Tekeando developed the session's summary of the whole process in a blog.<sup>1</sup> and a wall mural, as well as a booklet for the children and young participants
- Peer-to-peer interviews. The young participants from both case studies interviewed each other about their experience with the workshops.
- Semi-structured interviews and autobiographical reflections. These were developed by the educators and social workers who participated in the workshops.
- Written records of researcher-educator meetings. During the field period, regular meetings were held between the researchers, educators, and participating entities, 17 meetings in total. These meetings were oriented to collective reflection and knowledge building to communicate needs, expectations and perceptions of the process.

It is important to highlight that research techniques are never neutral; they always exist within a specific framework and context, and their significance lies in their usage (Bartra, 2012).

How we engage in research (understood as methodology) necessarily flows from our own epistemological commitments (about what and how we know and who can know) at the time of the study (Wigginton and Lafrance 2019). We consider it essential to clarify what these commitments imply, and therefore, we approach this issue in the next section of this paper.

### **Feminist epistemologies and methodologies and the politics of childhood**

Our feminist positioning orients our research. How we perceive, analyse, and question aspires to have and promote a non-sexist and non-androcentric approach. Thinking about feminist research goes beyond methods and technics; it is an issue of methodology, this is, of the 'theory or analysis of how the research does or should proceed' (Harding, 1987, 3 in Wigginton and Lafrance 2019, 11) Therefore it requires thinking about the research process from design to dissemination. This implies carefully considering how and with whom we engage in question selection and asking, in answer development and discussion, in interpretation, representation, and dissemination of knowledge and, also, in mobilising research for social change.

Feminist epistemology and philosophy are neither a uniform theoretical block nor a category that responds to a homogeneous discourse (Harding 2008, p.7, Flax 1990, p.188). Depending on how social divisions of gender and its hierarchies are conceived and how the subalternity of a gender is analysed and explained, different feminist approaches can be developed<sup>2</sup>. As a result, neither feminist methods nor methodology are one, unique or uniform. Feminist methods are not predetermined but developed during research, just like any other method. It may even arise spontaneously rather than through intentional effort (Bartre 2012). However, as researchers, we are also part of territorial, meaning, and epistemic communities (Trevilla and Peña-Azcona, 2020), and feminist methodologies, being rich and diverse, also share some common grounding (Cuklanz and Rodríguez, 2020, Erol y Cuzlaz, 2020):

- The effort to provide an intellectual challenge to create new knowledge either by **reviewing** previous theories and methodologies or by *generating new fields of study* through interdisciplinary research
- The political commitment to work towards gender equality and social justice to encourage social change.

- The need to push the boundaries of research and to expand the limits of traditional academic writing in order to achieve new ways of investigating feminist methodologies, in order to raise critical consciousness,
- the emphasis on the diversity of human experience related to gender at the intersection of race, sexuality, and other identity categories.

Having this in mind, addressing research from a feminist perspective requires, on the one hand, examining gender in conjunction with other societal factors such as class, ethnicity, functional diversity, age, and sexual orientation to fully understand social inequalities. These axes of power operate as organisational principles of social structures in different socio-historical and geographical contexts and also within our case studies. This approach serves as an epistemological, methodological, and political obligation and is also crucial for gaining autonomy and emancipation, but it also (Trevilla and Peña-Azcona, 2020).

On the other, this approach invites us to develop participatory research agendas and practices with a gender perspective and oriented to action. Feminist perspectives and critique substantiate, complete and reinforce participatory research proposal. The dialogue between participatory and feminist foundations breaks down the dichotomy between the scientific and the political, incorporates new subjects of knowledge and defends a relational idea of knowledge and value, further developing social research's explanatory and transformative potential (Pajares Sánchez 2020).

When implementing a feminist research methodology, it should be crucial to consider and create real opportunities for feedback. This includes providing feedback to those who participate in the research project and recognising (in a wide sense) their vital contributions. It is essential to reflect on feedback's epistemological, theoretical, and ethical aspects to ensure that it is meaningful and effective (Lafita- Solé et al, 2022). In addition to this, the presentation of results could also rupture with the traditional and masculine canons (serious, impersonal, cold, distant...). From a feminist viewpoint, objectivity is not divorced but reinforced by the subjective and the personal approaches. Moreover, the seriousness is not divorced from metaphorical language, with first and second-person writing and aesthetically pleasing language (Bartra 2012), verbal and not verbal. These issues have been central in our case studies, and the following section discusses them.

## Practising and sustaining educational commons from a feminist perspective? Discussion and conclusions

Starting from the assumptions and principles mentioned above, how did we, the adult team, develop and investigate communing relations within the case studies? This process dealt with two interrelated spheres of reflection:

- The conceptualisation of educational commons
- The practice of educational commons

Concerning the conceptualisation of the educational commons, we devote one face-to-face meeting to address and advance a shared definition of educational commons. Working in small groups, we constructed two wall murals on the three pillars of the educational commons: community, common good and governance. Paying attention to the less privileged positions of the educators' and social workers' lives, voices, experiences, and contributions favoured the visualisation of the precarity of their working conditions and how this affected the development of the educational commons. From these discussions, we discovered that the flourishing and sustainability of the educational commons require, in addition to the three pillars, an adequate 'substratum' conformed (as one of the murals showed) by people (healthy bodies), material resources (money), emotions (joy).

This brings us to the second sphere of reflection, the importance and materialisation of sharing, caring and cooperating inter and intra-generational relations within the educational commons. The adult team devoted one online meeting to uncover and discuss children's and young people's practices of caring, sharing, and cooperating on the workshops. Building on this work, the research team (the authors of this paper) also delved into identifying the centrality of these practices also within the relations of the adult team.

Focusing on both the intra and inter-generational relations allowed us to identify examples of the different phases of care for caring well as described by Tronto (1993, 2013):

1. 'Caring about': attention, worry and concern about other people's needs and desires;
2. 'Taking care of': arrangements around these needs/desires;
3. 'Care-giving': activities of actually looking after someone;
4. 'Care-receiving': how these activities crucial and inevitable for life are well received;
5. 'Caring-with': the ideal process of solidarity and reciprocity fundamental to communing care.

The statement 'No commons without community' (Mies 2014) is nowadays a key idea in the study and practice of the commons, as no commons could exist without a community that took care of them. However, the claim 'No community without care' is not so visible yet, even though the community as a care-providing entity

requires care itself to be sustainable. In this path, feminist scholars have identified care as a common (Federici 2018, Vega-Solis et al. 2018, Zechner 2021) and claim that under the 'paradigm of the commons', we could develop alternative welfare formulas that transcend institutionalised ones and require greater citizen participation (Mártinez-Buján and Vega 2021).

This notion of caring is very connected to the relations of sharing: sharing is the act and process of 'distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use' Belk (2007, 126). Within our case studies, there was an inter and intra-generational sharing of materials, ideas, feelings and emotions, which was fundamental for favouring caring about each other. Moreover, sharing beyond the educational commons community pushed the boundaries of research and dissemination to expand the limits of traditional academic writing and communicating results to achieve new ways of disseminating the case study beyond the more academic presentation formats.

These achievements were possible because of the cooperating relationships. Decolonial approaches oriented our view of cooperation. A view based on attending to people's needs (caring about) that values particular knowledge and capacities as a two-way strategy (reciprocity). In this sense, cooperating becomes a politically motivated process of reciprocal and equitable exchange of capacities between individuals and groups (Surasky, 2013) oriented to address inequalities and exclusions.

As previously said, this process implies an increasing awareness of privileges and the inevitable imperfection of our feminist research practice. In this path, the research ethic and reflexivity (a dual process of reflexivity), considered an integral part of the research process rather than a distinct feature (Christensen and James 2017), take a central stage. This is because feminist methods cannot be predetermined; they are developed during research, just like any other method. It may even (although that is not the most frequent case) arise spontaneously rather than through intentional effort (Bartre 2012).

Our process has shown us that sharing, caring and cooperating as the basis for creating, practising and sustaining educational commons requires a feminist positioning. The justification and selection of our research question did not hide our political objective, our research process did not call for false neutrality, and our (provisional) answers are opened to different conceptions of the world and the generation of knowledge that aligns with the political and social project of feminism. This is, a project calls for addressing the theoretical, methodological and policy implications of vulnerability and interdependency as well as of trust and



joy as spaces of resistance and commons construction within a horizon of social inclusion and equality.

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<sup>1</sup> The narrative blog entries of the workshops describe the creative artistic process as a logbook; see more at: <https://elmanual.tekeando.net/2022/02/17/capitulo-ii-aguita/>.

<sup>2</sup> However, we can identify some shared elements: all feminist epistemologies point at identifying, explaining and transforming the conceptual and material power practices of dominant social institutions, including scientific disciplines, to benefit those who benefit least from those institutions. (Harding 2008). For that, they reject the idea of neutrality in research and science (Harding 2004, 2008; Haraway 1995, 2004). Instead, it acknowledges the potential of partial, critical and situated knowledge to detect the key actualities of social relation