

Learning Spaces

Teresa Eça (APECV, CIAC); Angela Saldanha(APECV, CIAC); Raquel Balsa (APECV); Celia Ferreira (APECV); Dori Nigro (APECV); Matias Pancho (ASSOL)

The video is a visual narrative about a pilot experience with activist artists/social designers and art educators and other people from an organisation offering leisure and learning activities for people with mental disabilities. The experience, an arts based study, aims to enquire about learning spaces using photo voice.

Keywords: art education; art activism; pedagogies, participatory design; participatory art; social transformation; learning; inclusion.

In ASSOL the caregivers use a methodology based on “gentle teaching”, advocating for love and affection as being the best therapy. Gentle Teaching is an international partnership aimed at developing mentors and trainers according to its methods. Their focus is to strengthen companionship and community for all those they serve—children, adults and families that are struggling with mental illness, experiencing disability, homelessness, addictions and involvement with the criminal justice system. “Companionship is the cornerstone of a Gentle Teaching practice, creating meaningful, human connections between the person and the caregiver (McGee, 2019). The unconditional acceptance and gentle presence of this relationship establishes trust, and cultivates mutual learning and growing together (McGee & Brown; 2019).

After the COVID-19 lockdown, Assol started the activities in June 2020 with safety measures; protection equipment and social distance. It was a nice surprise that all people involved accepted with a good spirit such measures, they showed understanding and consciousness about the “new normality”. For the caregivers and for the people with disabilities the difficulty in the day life was the social distance. We have tried every day, in every moment, to show that distance is only physical and not social. We have to use more often two main tools of Gentle Teaching: our eyes and our words instead of

the third tool: our hands. We had to balance the absence of our touch and our hugs. We had to be more present, more concentrated in our interactions with the person.

Sometimes, people with disabilities can also teach things to the caregivers, like their thoughts that the most important thing is to be in the present, doing things together, in community. The past and the future are not so important as the present moment.

APECV, Association of Visual Art Teachers from Portugal, is working in the area of visual arts education providing learning opportunities through arts education and community arts projects based raising awareness of art education potential for education to values, citizenship, sustainable development and social cohesion. The association promotes the development of research projects in the area of arts education promoting art making as a collaborative learning experience to foster emotional well being. APECV research group have been collaborating with the caregivers in ASSOL bindery for many years. In our frequent visits to the bindery we observed a culture of hope through unconditional love and respect for one another. Many activities conducted in the institution help to find meanings together and create new memories through art practices fostering a sense of belonging. We have learned much with the caregivers in ASSOL.

With the pandemic situation between March and June 2020, APECV activities were all adapted to online events. Our professional development courses for teachers; workshops and conferences were all conducted using video conference webtools. But by end June 2020, we conducted a few workshops with a limited number of people, because we felt some artistic activities need to have the dimensions of physical time and space to achieve better results.

In 2020 APECV was involved in the three year European Project AMASS¹ coordinated by the University of Lapland. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Among other aims, the partners intend to develop multidisciplinary methods for capturing, assessing and harnessing the societal impact of the arts and valuing and learning through alternative knowledge systems with the purpose of decolonising institutions, enable communication and implement policies. APECV research team, involved in AMASS, invited ASSOL caregivers and users to contribute to the project helping us to make a pilot study to understand ways of learning and alternative

¹AMASS: Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture (870621 — AMASS — H2020-SC6-TRANSFORMATIONS-2018-2019-2020/H2020-SC6- TRANSFORMATIONS-2019). See here the Project webpage: <https://amassproject.weebly.com/about.html>

knowledge systems. The research group included 3 social designers; one performance artist; 2 art educators; one caregiver and 12 men and women with different abilities/mental disabilities and very different learning backgrounds. All the people involved in the research group participated in photovoice actions. In the first action, participants were invited to photograph the most important learning spaces of their lives during one week, using the Polaroids cameras they found in the kit given by APECV people. In APECV, when we want to create a strong relationship with participants for a workshop we always make manually Kits to offer to everyone. This time Angela made small bags and pins with the slogan: 'Isolate with Love, to promote resilience in the context of social distancing measures of COVID-19 pandemic. For us the gift made by us with our hands and love, is an ice-breaking strategy enabling possibilities to build a compromise between the parties.

In the second action, one week later, individual and group conversations about the photographs were conducted. Learning was defined in the photovoice results as encountering something new with someone learners could trust as a friend and adviser. The facilitators were also recognized as places for learning. Understanding an educator, a caretaker and facilitator as a place of learning, is a very particular understanding of a pedagogical relationship, where the educator is a territory, a safe place where new things can be explored. Learning needs space and time, needs someone with a name, someone we can trust and respect in the path of a learning journey. A learning journey is made of learning events, local spaces we explore during a certain time of our lives alone and with others.

During the photovoice experiment, we understood, the spaces where learning may occur may be in the road; in a truck; the river; the school; the television; internet; with the family; with the caregiver; in the mountain, with the stones of the mountain, during a family trip; during tragic and happy events. Learning can be an encounter with a new situation; or a new vision of a situation; or a dialogue with other(s). Learning encounters are always shared with someone we trust, and through these learning experiences we build new memories and we gain hope in the future.

References

- McGee, J. & Brown, M. (2019). *O Essencial da Pedagogia da Interdependência*. Oliveira de Frades: Edição ASSOL.
- McGee, J. (2019). *Cuidar Criando Boas Memórias*. Oliveira de Frades: Edição ASSOL.

About the authors



Ângela Saldanha, born in Portugal, 1984 PhD in Arts Education, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto. She has undergone 2 Postdoctoral degrees in Digital Media Art, Open University of Lisbon. Currently she is a researcher at the Center for Research in Arts and Communication, at the Portuguese Open University and at the Institute of Research in Arts, Design and Society, University of Porto in Portugal. She has several academic backgrounds in the area of multimedia, ceramics and contemporary artistic production. Conducts arts based research and [activist art and education international projects with C3](#) collective of art education researchers and artist educators.

Celia Ferreira, was born in Portugal. MA in Art Education (Open University of Lisbon), visual arts teacher. Member of APECV research team and trainer at CFAN-APECV Portuguese visual arts teachers' training center.

Dori Nigro was born in Brazil, PHD student in the program of Performing Arts at University Of Coimbra, Portugal. Community artist and art activist.

Matias Pancho: was born in Angola in 1974, has a professional course of Graphic Arts (1994) by EPOA, Vila Nova de Cerveira and a bachelor degree in Technology and Graphic Arts (1997), IPT Tomar. Freelancer in graphic design since 1998; Caregiver in ASSOL since 1999, working with disabled people in a bookbinding place. Using Gentle Teaching in ASSOL since 2008, has presented two communications about the work in ASSOL in the Gentle Teaching International Conferences (Netherlands2018 and Belgium2019).

Raquel Balsa, was born in Portugal. Social designer and art activist, works as free lancer in community projects, member of APECV research team.

[Teresa Torres de Eça](#), born in Portugal 1961. PhD in Arts Education at University of Surrey Roehampton, UK. Coordinates the [CFAN-APECV Portuguese visual arts](#) teachers' training center. Conducts arts based research and [activist art and education international projects with C3](#) collective of art education researchers and artist educators.