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Network 29: Art, education, democracy

“In light of racist statements /.../ it feels hopeful to meet people from all over the world who really work in a completely different direction - for example a large research networks for artistic subjects in school and for inclusion and anti-racism in all educational contexts”, writes Ebba Theorell, a Swedish artist, educator and university lecturer at Stockholm University, at her social media after EERA's (European Educational Research Associations; <https://eera-ecer.de/>) major research conference in Glaskow in the Summer of 2023.

Modern Barndom [Modern Childhood, a magazine published by the Swedish Reggio Emilia Institutet] gets curious and contact her and her colleagues, the convenors of Network 29, and got a valuable glimpse of this network.



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First of all, the spirit of this network is an extension of EERA's, where researchers and emergent researchers feel always welcomed and supported. Particularly for us it is

important to transgress some formats of presentation in our annual conference (ECER), but also to be innovative in the ways that we built and reaffirm our community. In that sense we are promoting a way of doing groundbreaking research, introducing novel and experimental ways of researching based on arts and education contemporary discourses but always with the support of peers, which we feel is a fundamental issue nowadays.

As a network, we are interested in creating a community as space for:

- 1) sharing our research and learn from, through and with others
- 2) find academics and scholars with similar interests to collaborate and create initiatives, projects, and research with.

Your two latest Special Calls – about *Arts and democracy* and *Transdisciplinarity among arts* – really pique my curiosity. So I would like to ask you about that:

- a) **How can research on arts education help us in shaping and rethinking conceptions and practices of democracy?**

Well, that was precisely the challenge that we made to our network's community.

We believe that our special calls give space to address more specifically the issues that are met for the most part of the current research. However, and this was the case of the special call on Arts and Democracy (ECER 2023), as a network that reflects about the challenges and difficulties of this particular time in the world, we have the responsibility to instigate the reflection, and hence the research about urgent subjects.

Throughout the last decades, the perception of a crisis of democracy in Europe has gained force. The phenomenon is part of a global trend, marked by the rise of identity politics and the disassociation between liberalism, civic participation, and democracy. While surveys have shown that Europeans still prefer democratic values (Reynié, 2019; IDEA, 2021), researchers have warned about the erosion of democracy and the shrinking of the European civic space. In parallel, the Eurobarometer Youth Survey 2021 showed that most young people in Europe consider participating in forms of street politics equally or more effective than voting. The rise of youth global movements for climate action can be taken as an example youth's concern on their future and will to engage in collective action. Democracy might be eroding, but some youths are aware of the need to take action to defend a sustainable global future. In this context it is relevant to foster democratic engagement among young people by integrating contemporary media arts and creative practices to invite young people to develop a historical and cultural awareness of what democracy means. The aim of these initiatives is to contribute to opening the range of subjectivities and agencies involved, and to invite young people and other social groups to consider the past and the present, and then to imagine alternative futures in terms of democracy.

Starting from this need to re-imagine new frameworks and practices for critical democracy, the Special Call proposal invited arts education researchers to present proposals and actions that bring into play forms of participation in the common good that go beyond voting in elections. Actions in which individuals feel and see that their claims and contributions are carried out. Some questions that emerged were:

Democracies all over the world are more than ever at risk, so what can the arts do about it? Can we identify authoritarian regimes in our own research? How can we be more democratic in Arts Education methodologies, research methods or even in our own academic writing? Here we, as a network can of course discuss how to stimulate democratic processes through student agency and also how we can develop a sensibility towards our students, especially for some of them becoming art teachers.

For children growing up, and for all citizens it is very important that our educational systems can offer many ways for children to express themselves. The arts, aesthetic education is, at its best, also a way out from conformity and stereotypes. But of course, the arts can also preserve conformity and that is why we have to pay much attention to how we work with the arts pedagogically, didactically and continuously ask ourselves how we can transform our educational systems to being more open, more inclusive and more tolerant towards diversity - to many different voices.

b) Can you tell me something about how your Special Call about Transdisciplinarity amongst the arts came into view – what do you think is important, interesting – about sharing projects where artistic disciplines are entangled?

Even if we see walls being built everywhere the truth is that they are set to be broken down. More and more, the complexity of our reality asks for crossing disciplines and work in a more transversal way, in which look for solutions and societal transformations joining communities and stakeholders and academics from different fields of expertise. Every time is more common research projects that require the convergence and collaboration from different areas, contexts, people, interests and disciplines. It is of most importance to acknowledge and foster those entangled dynamics, which make us realize our interdependency as researchers but also the richness of crossing different disciplinary perspectives. It is also a question of vitality, transdisciplinarity creates a pulse, new oxygen to the learning process and the subject matters themselves are renewed.

The concept of diversity, in all its manifestations, is at the heart of the work of EERA. On the other hand, transdisciplinarity in research is increasingly being recommended by the European Commission. Kagan (2017) talks about *cisdisciplinarity* to refer to the trend in research to split knowledge in disciplines “ignoring that a discipline can merely contribute a fragmentary and situated knowledge on one dimension of reality” (p. 157). As alternative to this, many researchers are working in a transdisciplinary way.

According to Pohl and Hirsch-Hadorn (2007), transdisciplinary research ... integrates a variety of disciplines and actors from public agencies, civil society and the private sector, in order to identify and analyse problems with the aim of developing knowledge and practices that promote what is perceived to be the common good (p. 16).

Working in a transdisciplinary research environment allows a more transversal and inclusive participation of the different social collectives. In this line, Marshall (2014) states that “transdisciplinarity . . . connotes a practice or domain that rises above disciplines and dissolves their boundaries to create a new social and cognitive space” (p. 106). This is being more evident in contemporary art, in which artists work on collaboration with other professionals or include other perspectives in their work (e.g.

Mark Dion use procedures and perspectives from biology, archeology, and natural history; Núria Güell has worked with lawyers, and prison personnel among others; artists in residence in CERN, Geneve, works with phisicians; etc.).

In this way, this call looks for papers that present different approaches, methods and outcomes that have been developed in educational contexts around the globe that connect transdisciplinarity with diversity.

The aim of this special call is to create a critical mass and reflect on what transdisciplinarity in arts and education do when they are put at work as a place of research and diversity contexts

Network 29 encourages papers/interventions/discussions that describe and provide theoretical frameworks for several (eight) “goals”. I 'm curious about this one: *The seeking for new narratives that take the European perspectives in confrontation with the concepts of difference and the Other.* Can you share something about this to our readers (mainly pedagogues) that you find interesting?

It is connected with the network’s responsibility which we talked about earlier, expressed in cultural and social terms. First of all, Europe has many ‘Europes’ and sometimes the ‘main’ narratives make invisible or shadows the ‘other or alternative’ narratives. If we understand Europe as a multiplicity, then it is important to review the main discourses and look after its diversity. It is important to include neofeminist, decolonial and perspectives based on the otherness that go beyond the unique discourse for all. It is a question to acknowledging the multiple layers and collectivities that cohabit Europe and have room for all.

And, secondly, despite the fact that we are part of an European Association, we cannot forget that we welcome people from all over the world in our conferences, whether as authors or simply participants. Therefore it is important the proposals that are accepted don’t speak only for Europeans, disregarding all the non-european stances. We are not alone in the world, so it is necessary to confront ourselves with other positionalities to build new narratives that acknowledge the recognition of difference, and most of all the need to justly articulate with it.

In many countries today, from early age (nurcerys, pre-schools, elementary schools...), children have less and less opportunity to engage in, express themselves, investigate and learn through different aesthetic’s subjects and in a practice that offers experimentation with all sences at the expence of more focus on theoretical and instrumental teaching in other subjects.

Let us first clarify that a rhetoric of the effects, as Gaztambide-Fernández puts it, has only mischievous consequences on Arts Education’s affirmation in the curriculum. Its relevance should not be underpinned on the effects that it promotes in other subjects like Math, Languages or Science subjects. The arts are both of their own value and can give great benefits to other subjects but also to to mental health, physical health and to learning itself. The aesthetic dimensions are a part of every subject, because the aesthetic dimensions are a part of life. Pulse, rhythm, repetition and variation, patterns and so on.

Do you think that your research – and especially Network 29 – can:

a) influence the quality of art education?

In terms of macro level, most of the conditions depend more on political resolutions than directly on research itself. However, in terms of mezzo and micro level, we know that a great part of NW29 authors are also practitioners in arts and/or arts education. This means that being part of this network allow them to: 1) present and refine their own research, with the contributions shared in the discussions,; 2) know other authors' research, conceptions, ideas, discourses, perspectives approaches, methodologies.... In this way, authors take home new perspectives, ideas and suggestions to put in practice. The exchange that takes place in the conferences and other activities organized during the year is without any doubt its greatest value. One important aspect is also that many of us are active in teaching teacher students at different universities around the world..

b) and above all (and most interesting for our readers), become a counter force to the reduction, the questioning of aesthetic subjects in pre-schools and elementary schools?

NW 29 embraces research from all kind of fields, variations, and combinations that contains arts education equation. This means that it can affect in all subjects, and all kind of educational institutions and organisms.

Again, this is above all a political matter that we feel somewhat skeptical about the level of change that we can promote. Nevertheless, and recognizing that changes are not always made from research to educational practices but also the other way around, we firmly believe that network 29 is contributing to reinforce the power of researchers as interconnected, critical, reflective, responsible, active subjects that address their research or their own practitioner contexts (in arts and/or education) in ways that hopefully can be reproduced.

This means that changes can make it from practice to research, or from research to practice no matter the political normatives, because people feel empowered to have a say and this only happens if they feel supported. And that is also our secret mission, not entirely impossible, we believe!

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FOOTNOTE: For more information about Network 29
<https://eera-ecer.de/networks/29-research-on-arts-education>
and EERA, European Educational Research Association
<https://eera-ecer.de/>