

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

The Use of the Arts Throughout the Participatory Action Research Process

Allison J. Lester, PhD¹¹ Arizona State University<https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.164779>

Journal of Participatory Research MethodsVol. 7, Issue 4, 2026

Long before research professionalized into protocols and peer review, communities made and shared knowledge through story, image, song, and movement. People named their conditions in murals, argued about justice in theater, carried memory in music, and rendered the unspeakable visible through making. Formal research, in its drive toward the propositional and the measurable, has too often left these ways of knowing at the door, treating the arts, if it considered them at all, as ornamentation arriving safely after the “real” work was done. In recent years, action researchers globally have begun to reckon with the costs of that exclusion: who text-bound dissemination reaches and who it leaves out, whose knowledge it legitimizes and whose it renders illegible, and how much of what communities understand about their own lives never survives translation into the conventions of the academic article. This special issue takes up the arts as a method: a set of practices capable of doing rigorous, generative work at every stage of inquiry.

The Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) offers a fitting home for this conversation. Initially organized in 2012 by five action research network initiators, ARNA was created to support and promote a wide variety of participatory research traditions across the Americas and beyond. Its mission is to provide a collegial, practice-oriented, and professional development space where practitioners and students of action research can share ideas, develop initiatives, and strengthen the position of action and participatory research in diverse communities around the globe. ARNA’s work is grounded in knowledge democracy: the belief that knowledge production, knowledge dissemination, and public inquiry should honor many ways of knowing and serve critical social, educational, and environmental concerns. Its values of honesty, integrity, inclusiveness, multi-vocality, engagement, achievement, sustainability, and democracy offer a powerful frame for this issue. They remind us that participatory research is a methodology and a set of ethical commitments about who gets to ask questions, whose interpretations matter, and how knowledge should move in the world. The 2025 ARNA conference centered the arts as a form of communicating and making meaning throughout the research process, and it is the learning and exchange from that gathering that this special issue, produced in partnership between the *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* and ARNA, seeks to extend and make portable.

In keeping with that purpose, this issue is meant to disrupt a familiar and limiting assumption: that the arts belong only at the end of research, as a more appealing way to present findings already secured by other means. The contributors gathered here insist instead that artistic inquiry can do epistemic work at every stage. The arts can shape the questions a community decides are worth asking, draw people into the research who would never have answered a survey, generate and analyze data that defies categories, and democratize how findings travel back to the people who produced them. The authors have experienced firsthand how conventional methods can flatten complex experience and exclude the very people a study claims to be about, and they write from a shared belief that how research is made matters as much as what it concludes.

The articles featured in this issue prioritize the practice of arts-based participatory research as much as its promise. Together, they move across the full arc of inquiry, showing how the arts can help researchers enter communities, build trust, generate data, analyze meaning, sustain relationships, and carry findings into action. The collection begins before data collection, in the fragile and often under-theorized work of invitation. In “Beyond Recruitment: Developing Relational Pathways for Participation Through a Dance Club in Critical Engaging Participatory Action Research,” Maria del Pilar Rojas Quimbay shows how an Afro dance club became a culturally responsive, embodied pathway into research with second-generation African Australian students. Dance was not a recruitment tool added onto the study; it was the relational ground through which trust, belonging, leadership, and participation became possible. In “Sharing Power, Imagining Power with Art in Youth Participatory Action Research,” Peggy Shannon-Baker and colleagues similarly treat the arts as woven through youth-led inquiry, offering recommendations for adult partners who want to support young people in choosing topics, methods, analyses, and actions that reflect their own worlds. “Today’s Changemakers Creatively Resisting: An Art-Based YPAR Project by Black Student Union Leaders,” by Celina German et al., extends this youth-centered thread through a Black Student Union’s use of digital media, travel, narrative, and community dialogue to transform school culture and prepare action-oriented conference presentations.

Several articles demonstrate how artistic practice can help communities document lived experience that conventional instruments often fail to hold. In “Do You See What I Smell? A Participatory Visual Arts Method for Documenting Residents’ Experiences with Odors in Providence, Rhode Island,” Tracy A. Corley et al. offer a step-by-step collage method for residents confronting environmental racism and air pollution. The method makes sensory experience, place-based memory, and official denial visible in ways that support coalition building, social-political learning, and community governance. “Participatory Research and Collaborative Arts: Pathways with the Mbya Guarani and Gunadule Peoples for Environmental Justice,” Lenin

Alfonso Morales and colleagues bring readers into intercultural and decolonial research with Indigenous communities in Brazil and Panama, where culture circles, songs, storytelling, sketch maps, shared walks, and spiritual practices become legitimate forms of knowledge production. In Ashley Mason's et al. article, "Climate ReAssemblies: Innovating Community Engagement with Climate Policy through Creative Participatory Methods," creative and collective storytelling reimagines climate assemblies, challenging expert-led, procedural models of deliberation by inviting more reflective, situated, and citizen-driven engagement with climate futures and policy knowledge exchange. In "Arts-Based Participatory Methods to Improve Early Childhood Care and Education Practitioner Wellbeing in an Impoverished South African Context," Lesley Wood et al. describe arts-based activities within a participatory Future Creating Workshop to help Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners name their wellbeing needs, imagine sustainable strategies, and embed mutual support in an ongoing community of practice. JPRM does not usually publish studies but Sarai Richter's piece "Yoga Nidra as Participatory Praxis: Arts-Based Tools for Antiracist Healing and Social Transformation" paints a compelling use-case for a practice not typically found in research.

Other contributions take up a stage of participatory research that is often the least participatory: analysis. "Collaborative Collaging as Data Analysis: A Tutorial for Using Arts-Based Methods to Include Co-Researchers in Data Analysis," Sally Thomas offers practical activities through which young people with special educational needs and disabilities select, sort, theme, and interpret visual data. The article directly confronts the assumption that analysis must remain in the hands of university researchers because it is too technical, too time-intensive, or too text-bound. "Using Graphic Recording and Graphical Frameworks as a Participatory Method to Facilitate Research on Complex Policy Analysis," by Abe Oudshoorn and Emma Richard, shows how illustration can unstick analysis when research teams face large volumes of complex policy data. Graphic recording and graphical frameworks become ways of thinking with participants, rather than visual summaries prepared after conclusions have already been reached. Maranda Ward's article, "The Analytic Utility of Poetically Transcribing Interview Data in a Participatory Action Research Study," likewise treats aesthetic form as analytic practice. Through poetic transcription, interview data become data poems that preserve participants' language, reduce large amounts of text, and invite participants into the interpretation and representation of themes.

Finally, the issue shows how arts-based PAR can carry knowledge into public, embodied, and emotionally resonant action. Lalenja Harrington and Sabrina Kaiser's article, "Collective Care in Action: Theatre of the Oppressed as Critical Participatory Action Research in a College-Based Undergraduate Research Experience" demonstrates how applied theatre can make the body a site of knowledge, using Theatre of the Oppressed to explore access, disability justice, ableist systems, and collective care with undergraduate students and

community members. “Co-Creating Fictional Stories with People Who Have Diabetes While Experiencing Homelessness: A Community Participatory Arts-Based Project in Calgary, Canada,” by Saania Tariq and colleagues, turns to fictional storytelling, film, and theatre as participatory health research methods, showing how people with lived experience can move beyond consultation and into co-authorship of narratives that challenge stigma and foster public understanding. Across the collection, readers will find protocols, vignettes, frameworks, facilitation moves, and hard-earned cautions. The arts appear here as many languages of inquiry: movement, collage, story, song, theatre, illustration, poetry, digital media, mapping, and collective imagination. In every case, the contribution is practical as well as philosophical: a method a reader can adapt on Monday, and a reminder that rigor deepens when more people can help shape what counts as knowledge.

What unites these pieces is a commitment to shared making, shared interpretation, and shared ownership of knowledge. When researchers invite community members to draw, perform, photograph, compose, map, move, or tell stories rather than only to respond, they concede something important: that the people at the center of the work are interpreters of their own experience, not data points to be collected and explained from a distance. The arts widen who can participate and multiply the forms in which understanding can be expressed, reaching what words alone often cannot. They also ask something of researchers. They ask us to slow down, to notice the forms of intelligence already alive in communities, to make room for emotion and embodiment, and to treat creative practice as part of the architecture of rigor rather than its soft edge.

This issue is offered as a springboard and a guidepost: a starting point for researchers newly curious about arts-based approaches, and a set of bearings for those already at work. We hope it encourages practitioners and scholars, in whatever language they research and whatever communities they serve, to treat the arts as a serious and rigorous part of the participatory research repertoire, and to keep building the methods that make knowledge more creative, more accessible, and more shared.

Accepted: July 07, 2026 EDT. Published: July 27, 2026 EDT.



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