The Arts- Based Research Methodology Learning Circle
3rd December 2025
PRIA, New Delhi, India

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The UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, in collaboration with the PRIA International Academy, organised a learning Circle focused on arts-based research.

The learning circle was designed as a critical pedagogical space to deepen understanding of alternative and arts-based methods. Conceived as a critical pedagogical space to explore and deepen understanding of alternative and arts-based research methods, it aimed to foster dialogue on creative, participatory, and symbolic forms of inquiry within community-based research. Situated within broader commitments to epistemic justice and knowledge democracy, the Learning Circle sought to strengthen methodological reflexivity and expand the repertoire of research practices that can meaningfully respond to complex social realities shaped by intersecting crises and structural inequities.

This session was co-facilitated by Dr. Catherine Etmanski, Professor at Royal Roads University, Canada, who is an expert in arts-based and participatory research, by Ms, Nikita Rakhyani, Lead, PRIA International Academy, and Ms. Saanya Sodhi, Coordinator, UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. The learning circle brought together participants from diverse geographical, institutional, professional backgrounds and experiences (see Annexure).

The session opened with introductions by Nikita Rakhyani, who framed arts-based research as a powerful medium of expression when conventional language proves insufficient. Participants were invited to introduce themselves by sharing their name, affiliation, and one thing that gives them hope. This simple yet evocative exercise revealed both convergence and divergence in lived realities—ranging from hope found in sunshine to candid expressions of hopelessness—underscoring the emotional, ethical, and relational terrain in which participatory research operates.

The learning circle then moved into a series of empirical illustrations demonstrating the practical application of arts-based methodologies. Samia Siddiqui, Programme Officer, Martha Farrell Foundation shared her work with women domestic workers in informal settlements under the Mai Bhi (Me Too) initiative. Faced with the risks associated with verbal disclosure of sexual and domestic violence, women were supported to collectively create a saree depicting their experiences through drawings. This artistic process served as a form of catharsis and enabled women to safely assert ownership over their data, later using the saree as an advocacy tool with institutional actors and within the broader Me Too movement.

Dr. David Francis Monk, Professor at GULU University, Uganda, followed with examples from Uganda, illustrating how theatre, role-play, and drawing were used during research on COVID-19 lockdown experiences in Gulu city. Participants enacted everyday struggles- curfews, policing, livelihoods, and survival- through drama and performance, including the involvement of city officials. This non-confrontational and dialogic approach enabled emotional expression, mobilization, and advocacy, demonstrating the unique capacity of art to surface lived realities that often remain inaccessible through conventional research tools.

Meghna Sandhir, Senior Programme Officer, PRIA reflected on the organisation's long-standing engagement with arts-based practices such as River of My Life, The Masks We Wear, and collective time-mapping exercises like the "daily digital clock." Drawing on PRIA's work on digital trust and women's collectivisation, she highlighted how creative processes enable self-expression, shared meaning-making, and insight into everyday routines, while also pointing to the ethical challenge of entering communities as outsiders.

From Latin America, Paloma Aguilar Forero, Regional Coordinator for the DECODE Project, shared practices from Indigenous communities in Colombia and Bolivia, including Guardians of the Forest. She presented methods such as zines, comic strips, walking-based inquiries (tours of the territory), and visual timelines that allowed non-literate women to reconstruct

personal and collective histories. These practices resulted in new knowledge products, including illustrated booklets and digital models such as Pachagrama, demonstrating how art can generate knowledge that is both locally grounded and politically meaningful.

A central experiential component of the learning circle was led by Prof. Etmanski through a PhotoVoice exercise. Participants were invited to photograph objects or scenes representing hope, followed by collective interpretation and reflection. The images—ranging from plants and libraries to human formations and a three-legged dog—sparked discussions on resilience, growth, knowledge democracy, connection, scarcity, care, and survival. The exercise revealed how symbolism allows multiple meanings to coexist and how attentive listening can either deepen or fracture collective narratives.

Situating the discussion within a rapid, unpredictable, paradoxical, and tangled (RUPT) and volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world marked by polycrisis, Prof. Etmanski offered six core reflections on arts-based research:

1. Arts are not inherently progressive; their emancipatory potential depends on ethical facilitation and their integration into community-oriented, decolonising frameworks.
2. Both process and product matter, with aesthetic quality becoming particularly important when the aim is public engagement or feminist advocacy.
3. Artists' expertise must be respected, recognising arts-based research as skilled practice rather than a supplementary tool (A/R/Tography).
4. Transformation is multifaceted, emerging through symbolic insight, political consciousness, trust-building, healing, solidarity, and beauty.

5. Arts-based methods are deceptively powerful, requiring trauma-informed facilitation, emotional literacy, and active listening.
6. The arts hold intrinsic value, extending beyond instrumental outcomes and remaining fundamental to human societies, especially amid shrinking cultural spaces.

The session concluded with collective reflections on the emotional labour of participatory research, the tension between rationality and affect, and the ethical responsibility of researchers to remain both rigorous and humane. In closing, Prof. Etmanski emphasised that when used ethically and skilfully, arts-based methodologies offer uniquely transformative pathways for research, community development, and social change—aligning closely with DECODE's vision of plural, democratic, and justice-oriented knowledge production.

Drawing the learning circle together, Prof. Etmanski emphasised that when applied ethically and with methodological rigour, arts-based approaches offer uniquely powerful and transformative pathways for research, development practice, and social change.

ANNEXURE

List of Arts- Based Research Methodology Learning Circle Participants, PRIA, New Delhi

Moderators-

1) **Dr. Catherine Ethmanski,**

   Professor, Royal Rhodes University, Canada

2) **Ms. Nikita Rakhyani,**

   Team- Lead, PRIA International Academy, PRIA, New Delhi, India

3) **Ms. Saanya Sodhi,**

   Coordinator, UNESCO Chair in Community- Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education Institutions, PRIA, New Delhi, India

Participants-

- **Sharin D'souza**

  Research Coordinator, Sangath, India

- **Komal**

  Research Associate, ISDM, India

- **Arpita**

  Assistant Professor, Gurugram University, India

- **Parul Mehra**

  Chief Project and Corporate Affairs Officer, ETASHA Society, India

- **Chandrabhan Maurya**

  Program Officer, Butterflies, India

- **Shalini Gupta**

  Project Manager, Cohesion Foundation, India

- **Irma Alicia Flores Hinojos**

  Professor, Faculty of Education, Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia

- **David Francis Monk**

  Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Gulu University, Uganda

- **Helen Kienon-Kabore Timpoko**

  Professor, University of Cocody, Côte d'Ivoire

- **Budd L. Hall**

  Co- Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community- Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, University of Victoria, Canada

- **Olivia Andrade de Almeida**

  Project Manager, DECODE Project, University of Victoria, Canada

- **Jutta Gertrud Anna Gutberlet**

  Professor, Department of Geography, University of Victoria, Canada

- **Paloma Aguilar Forero**

  Regional Coordinator, DECODE Project, Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia

- **Waldina Muñoz Martinez**

  Researcher, Women Spinners of Life Foundation, Villagarzón, Putumayo, Colombia

- **Eleodoro Baldiviezo Estrada**

  Researcher, PROSUCO, La Paz, Bolivia

- **Mahazan bin Abdul Mutalib**

  Professor, Faculty of Leadership & Management, Universiti Sains Islam, Malaysia

- **Asyirah Abdul Rahim**

  Associate Professor, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

- **Dr. Sonajharia Minz**

  Professor, School of Computers and System Science, Jawaharlal University, New Delhi, India