Fem Diàleg: Feminist participatory thinking space

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Fem Diàleg, which means ‘we dialogue’ in Catalan, is an initiative that started in 2019 and aims to develop the territory of dialogue as a design space and social practice, contributing to the dialogic learning practice present in many cultural traditions. Fem Diàleg’s proposition is to articulate the question of knowledge-creation praxis by triangulating: the feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge, art as a relational practice and dialogue as a shared and embodied reflexivity. Since its inception in 2019 Fem Diàleg has organized nine gatherings with over 250 participants and more than 22 invited artists and guests.

In this short paper, we present the case study of Fem Diàleg, explain the approach of the intervention and share the main insights gained through the design and hosting of the gatherings. We will deep dive into the implications for design and share the layers of social infrastructure that allow us to create a space of equality amongst participants, trust, mutual respect, care and commitment.

Dialogue; feminism; social practice; participatory thinking
1. Introduction

_Staying with the trouble requires learning to be present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful pasts and apocalyptic futures, but as cathonic beings entangled in many unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, and meanings_ (Haraway, 2016)

_This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births through as dream births concepts, as feelings births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding._ (Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider, 36)

Our biological systems are wired to identify and consolidate patterns, and this is how we are capable of learning and making sense of all the inputs that our senses perceive every second of our existence (Hoffman, 2015). We are conditioned to simplify, codify and pre-judge over everything we experience. Recognizing this human boundary is the first step to reframe our position of self-inquiry over the partial perspectives that govern our understanding of reality, and our experiences towards other forms of being and doing.

Transcended the great promises of progress of the twenty-first century, what is crystallizing is a landscape of monocultures that prevent us from seeing the capacity and intrinsic value of the ‘other’ and other ways of knowing. Monocultures frame us under single story lenses, compromising the heterogeneous ways of inhabiting and relating to the world. These fragmented narratives scale up in the digital echo chambers, rooting us in positions of fear and mistrust that prevent us from collectively reinterpreting the world (Adichie, 2009).

Our ability to dismantle the oppressive patterns that operate upon us, is closely related to the diversity of stories that we know. Stories give us the opportunity to transcend our own selves and to _become_ others. To unlearn and to reinterpret. Engaging and relating to multiple worlds requires opening to caring and knowing differently; it asks us to put on hold our common sense, and to weave relationships within different forms of knowing, ways of being and types of relationships. Therefore, enabling safe and trusted spaces of dialogue where situated knowledge can flourish is critical to enhance imagination and to assemble tools for collective resistance and reconstruction. Only through dialogue can we actually move towards the construction of “a world of many worlds” (_Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos_) as the Zapatista principle states.

How can we resist the dynamics of atomisation and division to articulate new forms of becoming? How can dialogue help us engage with ways of being and doing that are not the hegemonic ones? No single point of view will ever have a full understanding of the world; it is through our continuous dialogue with others that we create and recreate ourselves.

2. Approach

Fem Diàleg’s proposition is to articulate the question of knowledge-creation praxis by triangulating: the _Feminist_ epistemologies of situated knowledge, _Art_ as a relational practice and _Dialogue_ as shared embodied reflexivity. We aim to create intimate and safe spaces for first-person multi-dimensional stories to surface, while enabling the conditions for shared understanding.

1. _Feminist and intersectional_ as we integrate a materialist approach to knowledge creation, involving raising questions to unlearn and dismantle hierarchies of power that dominate the way
we know, think and act. It is “A critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions” (Haraway, 1988, 579).

II. **Art** becomes the embodiment of other ways of knowing. It widens the frame of possibility and enacts as a creative and freeing catalyst that enables the condition to create a new shared language that transcends the individual positions of experiencing the world. Art opens the possibility to immerse us in a unique shared context, where artistic expression is encouraged and celebrated among participants.

III. **Dialogue** is the tool that allows us to become and to generate with others. Following Paulo Freire’s approach, dialogue is conceived as an invitation to open the mind and the heart to enter into a courageous act of reviewing your beliefs and your positions, but it is also the horizontal and fraternal search to find new paths to advance together (Freire, 2007). Dialogue allows us to combine the rooting experience, the reflection about our own position in the world, with the collective shift, a collective experience about how we can generate with others. Dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants; each one must trust the others; there must be mutual respect, care and commitment.

Fem Diàleg is an intervention in itself as it creates the conditions to subvert the dogmas of purity and enables the entanglement of new affinities that come as a result of *otherness, difference and specificity* (Haraway, 2016).
3. From theory to practice

Fem Diàleg organized monthly encounters between September 2019 and June 2020, with a total of 9 gatherings, 3 of which took place in the digital space. During this time period, 250+ people participated in the in-person gatherings and 220+ on the digital ones, with the participation of individuals from all continents. The events engaged more than 22 artists and explored dialogical practices such as: world café, fishbowl, the money game, solo reflection, small circle - big circle, Q&As, storytelling and anonymous
sharing. Each event was framed under the lenses of different matters of concern carefully chosen by the Fem Diàleg team. Some of the topics explored have been: Feminisms, climate crisis, sexuality, money, ecofeminism, romantic love, female artist and the menstruation cycle.

3.1. Manifesto
One of the first efforts to organize the energy and to take it to a productive and creative territory was to write a manifesto. Writing the manifesto allowed the core team to build a common understanding about the purpose of this emerging space. The Fem Diàleg’s manifesto reflects the spirit of the space, that aims to create collectively and has been really foundational to build a sense of trust among all the stakeholders involved, and to prepare participants to be open. Being a grass-roots organization born from the union of diverse women, the Manifesto has been a core element to invite others to join the movement and to enable a common ground where everyone is welcomed.

3.2. Social infrastructure
Fem Diàleg’s core team has been composed of a group of women with diverse professional backgrounds, genealogies and personal experiences. The commitment of Mercedes de Jesus, Virginia Vigliar and Mercè Rua has been central to sustain the Fem Diàleg activities and to nurture the community. The core team wears multiple hats: research, journalism, experience design, event management, hosting, artist curatorship, communications, facilitation, etc. The second layer is composed of the community guests. They are the artists and thinkers who actively participate in the gatherings and share their experiences. It is important to note that they are not invited as experts as the ‘expert’ role makes no sense under the dialogical framework that guides action in the initiative. Instead, they are invited as catalysts for dialogue and collective thinking. The third layer is the community of participants. This community is composed of all the people who are joining the gatherings with the purpose of contributing, opening their hearts and minds to the experience.

3.3. Selection of themes
A central document that helps advance the activities and discussions is the topic sandbox, a document where it is noted all potential topics to explore collectively. This list of topics is informed by the conversations with the community of participants and guests, the personal experiences of the core team, and also by current affairs. The topics in the sandbox rest and gain their own shape while the core team takes time to do secondary and field research. This “resting” time is important to broaden the understanding of each topic and to approach it with all its complexity. This research and reflection time is critical to understand diversity and inclusion aspects under the specific lenses of the explored topic.
Figure 2 Opening panel of the Fem Diàleg about Feminisms. Source: Sarai Rua

Figure 3 Performance moment of Fem Diàleg about the Climate Crisis. Source: Sarai Rua
Figure 4 Live collage based on beliefs around money during de Fem Diàleg about this theme. Source: Sarai Rua

Figure 5 Small circle of discussion during the Fem Diàleg about Pleasure. Source: Sarai Rua
Figure 6 Playful moment during the Fem Diàleg about eco-feminism. Source: Sarai Rua

Figure 7 Screenshot of the participants of the Fem Diàleg about Romantic Love doing introspective work.
4. Conclusions

It has become more and more urgent to articulate initiatives that are trying to do things that go beyond fixing or adapting the current systems. Fem Diàleg is not an intervention that aims to deploy time-bounded projects or programs; instead, it aspires to reimagine entire systems and narratives, and focus on deep transformational change.

After over two years of activities sustained by volunteer work led by the enthusiasm from the initial group of promoters, resources are required to be able to build legitimacy and to sustain the project activities in its many dimensions (organizational, personal, emotional, physical). Although the project has experimented with some donation-based models, this does not feel to be the most appropriate structure for a space open and inclusive by definition. Therefore, the challenge remains to articulate a sustainability model that can help maintain this space where new social relationships and seeds for different possible futures are being cultivated. Funding initiatives such as Fem Diàleg, initiatives that are guided by ethos and relationships and not by metrics and data, is still really challenging in the current funding and grant-making spaces. We hope that experiences such as Pivot 2021 will contribute to fostering a change in the funding ecosystem, so that projects that seek to make space for interruptions, clarifications and divergent narratives, also find their opportunity to thrive.

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