RSIG Research Day 2023 Submission

**SOL EXPRESS IN THE TIME OF COVID: REFLECTIONS FROM A CREATIVE ARTS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT**

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**Objectives:** The purpose of this participatory research project was to explore people’s experiences of participating in a creative arts program that utilized an online format during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Method:** With the onset of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in March 2020, Sol Express, the creative arts group of L’Arche Toronto, moved its programming to an online format. In a response to a call by the editors of *Research in Social Science and Disability* to explore issues arising for disabled people due to the pandemic, Sol Express participants and creative facilitators decided to collaboratively design and carry out a participatory research project to explore the impact of the online format on individuals and on the group as a whole. A research team was established, consisting of two Sol Express members, four creative facilitators, and one academic who is a friend of the group. The research team designed and carried out the project, which consisted of four online Zoom sessions to which five more members of Sol Express were invited. In the larger online sessions, we explored the positive and negative features of an online format for a creative arts project. Participants were encouraged to use a variety of media, such as drawings, crafts, artefacts,music, and verbal sharing to explore fundamental questions such as ‘what was good about doing Sol Express online?’ and ‘what was hard about doing Sol Express online?’ Following the larger exploratory sessions, the research team gathered online to summarize what we had heard and to discuss themes. One team member, Madeline, was assigned to write up the findings. The paper was circulated and revised, after which the large group met to validate the findings and to finalize the paper.

**Results:** Findings indicate that there are both positive and negative consequences of online programming. Positive features include allowing people who live far away to join the group, thus increasing the program’s geographic reach; people gain technological and problem-solving skills; and people have at least some connection with each other during a difficult time. Negative features include the lack of physical contact and connection resulting from online formats; the ‘targeted’ approach of online technology that prevents casual conversation and is particularly limiting for people with visual impairments; and the fact that online formats ‘lose’ people in the community who do not have adequate support to help them get connected. We also learned that participatory research can be an inclusive and empowering process!

**Discussion/Conclusions:** Our findings indicate that while online formatting is useful in situations where people cannot physically access programs and allows connection over large distances, it does not replace the energy and comradery that results from in-person contact. Online programs may ‘lose’ people who are inadequately supported or are unable to manage the technology, thus excluding them from otherwise beneficial programs, and making it difficult for program organizers to know who is missing from community-based programs.