

ANIMATED VIDEO-MAKING: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO RESEARCHING INCLUSION AND SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRANT SENIORS

ANNIE HUNG

Simon Fraser University
annie_hung@sfu.ca

CHING-CHIU LIN

Simon Fraser University
ching-chiu_lin@sfu.ca

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay describes how we as artist-scholars used arts-based research (ABR) to examine seniors' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to consider ways of fostering social inclusion and integration through an ABR approach to public engagement with research. Central to this inquiry is how ABR, as visual storytelling that combines a narrative with digital content, allows us to capture these seniors' complex lived experiences while serving as public-friendly research output accessible to a wide range of community members.

Situating the Inquiry

Seniors across the world have been identified as particularly vulnerable to an array of impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many of us, seniors experienced fear, stress, and anxiety due to complying with physical distancing requirements. Some seniors faced challenges in meeting their basic needs during the pandemic, while others experienced social isolation, loneliness, and mental and physical health issues (Frank, 2020; Read et al., 2020; Steinman et al., 2020).

With online participation increasing, as a way to make peer and community connections, seniors' adoption of digital technologies and creative digital artmaking have provided opportunities for them to actively engage in a variety of social activities during the pandemic. Such activities—ranging from participating in Zoom video calls and social messaging apps to connecting through online social networks—allow seniors to foster a sense of connectedness and community engagement. This need is especially important for immigrant seniors who may experience barriers (i.e., language, social inclusion) to accessing their community.

In response to this need, in this visual essay we share an animated story, *Connecting During Covid* (Storied Lives, 2022), portraying one senior's learning and creative use of technologies. This animated video is part of a Canadian study exploring immigrant seniors' views and experiences during the pandemic. Narrated by Xun Hu Liu, directed and animated by the authors, *Connecting During Covid* tells the unique story of Principal Liu, a Chinese immigrant senior in Canada who continually created short videos documenting his online social networking events during the pandemic. Through this animated video, as a creative research output for disseminating our findings, we aim to capture the essence of his experience

to open a dialogue that may foster social inclusion and integration (Latremouille & Latremouille, 2021). We consider ABR as digital storytelling to be both a narrative inquiry “for participatory content creation” that contains “core aesthetic and social elements” (Burgess & Klæbe, 2009, p. 50) and a creative, friendly approach to promote public engagement with research. We encourage readers to watch *Connecting During Covid* while reading this visual essay as a reflective undertaking about making this animation. Through this animated digital narrative, we aim to locate the convergence of artmaking, well-being, and resilience, pondering linkages between lifelong learning and social connectedness for both seniors and the public.

Methodology and Research Design

We draw on selected findings of *Storied Lives*, a research project funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which explored the potential of arts-based knowledge, co-creation, and dissemination for capturing seniors' complex views and experiences during the pandemic. *Storied Lives* worked with immigrant seniors who are members of MOSAIC (Multi-lingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities), one of the largest non-profit settlement organizations in Canada, servicing immigrant, refugee, migrant, and non-mainstream communities in Metro Vancouver and throughout British Columbia. In 2021, we worked with a group of 16 immigrant seniors over the course of six months (Principal Liu being one of them), employing a hybrid approach that connects arts-based and qualitative methods through a reflective inquiry lens. Three types of data were collected: (1) individual semi-structured, 90-minute interviews via the Zoom video conferencing system or phone calls; (2) observation of six online Zoom social

events; and (3) collection of seniors' digital artifacts (e-copies of event recordings, videos, and online chat records) created during the pandemic. Data analysis included ongoing data summarization, transcript coding, and document analysis.

In this essay, we present Principal Liu's story along with our creative research output. In Principal Liu's case, the interview was conducted and transcribed in Mandarin and then translated to English. Our (the authors) language proficiency in both Mandarin and English allowed us to move between two languages when communicating with Principal Liu and our research team. We discussed themes that emerged before and during the writing of the story with Principal Liu's inputs and feedback. The script was written in both Mandarin and English. We then drew the storyboard to represent how the video will unfold before animating the scene frame by frame. In addition to his feedback through the entire process, we invited Principal Liu to be the narrator of the video, and we added English subtitles during post-production.

Centring our research design in ABR allows us to work with immigrant seniors to voice concerns related to the pandemic and thus increase their participation in their communities. Working with vulnerable community members as artist-scholars, we are aware of the need for inclusion and greater participation to help bridge potential language barriers and power inequities between participants and researchers. We believe ABR can help achieve greater equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) when researching vulnerable community members: for example, we ensured that our series of videos provided bilingual subtitles to reach multilingual audiences, and we ensured that images of visible minorities were portrayed in the video. ABR allows us to create space to reveal the experiences and knowledge of our participants instead of placing ourselves in the role of experts who

exercise exclusivity over knowledge. As Winner (2022) has pointed out, practices in progressive art education are increasingly participant-driven, in which the art reflects what matters to the participants rather than only to the artist-scholars (in this case, the authors). In our context, creating more space meant positioning Principal Liu’s voice at the centre of research. We invited Principal Liu to reflect on what was important and allowed this to emerge in the storytelling without having a pre-conceived notion of the outcome. This approach also positions our ABR framework, in which we see the intersection of artistic practice and scholarly investigation as an invitation to resurface both research participants’ and artist-researchers’ collaborative

voices. With this ABR framework, research outcomes cannot be separated from doing research (Pahl & Pool, 2021): That is, listening to, transcribing, writing, re-writing, and animating Principal Liu’s story became both the research methodology and the research output. Through ABR, our animated video, *Connecting During Covid*, plays the role of a communicative interface, functioning as a portrayal of visual articulation and a unique way of reimagining narrative inquiry. More than just the visual, the multimodal articulatory information embedded in this animation may suggest that we can use ABR as a reflective medium to invite more public engagement with research.

Self-Directed Digital Artmaking as Connection

In 2014, Principal Liu decided to move to Canada from China, where he had worked for decades as a public-school principal. In Chinese culture, continuing to address him by Principal Liu is an indication of the respect his past job title holds and a legacy of his work. In Canada, he found a sense of community through joining MOSAIC’s Multicultural Centre Chinese Group (MMCC). In the video *Connecting During Covid*, it was important to show Principal Liu’s connection to his community and how his artmaking process was an integral part of this connection. Much of Principal Liu’s learning happened through the practice of artmaking, as opposed to learning a skill for the sake of technical mastery. It appears to us that his artmaking was a form of inquiry driven by interest rather than by formal art elements and principles (Winner, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, he took photos at MMCC events, documenting and making event videos as a way of celebrating with his community members. Once the pandemic began, Principal Liu was no longer able to continue making art in this way; however, MMCC’s online activities enabled him to shift his artmaking practice while remaining dedicated to his desire to document community events. No longer able to

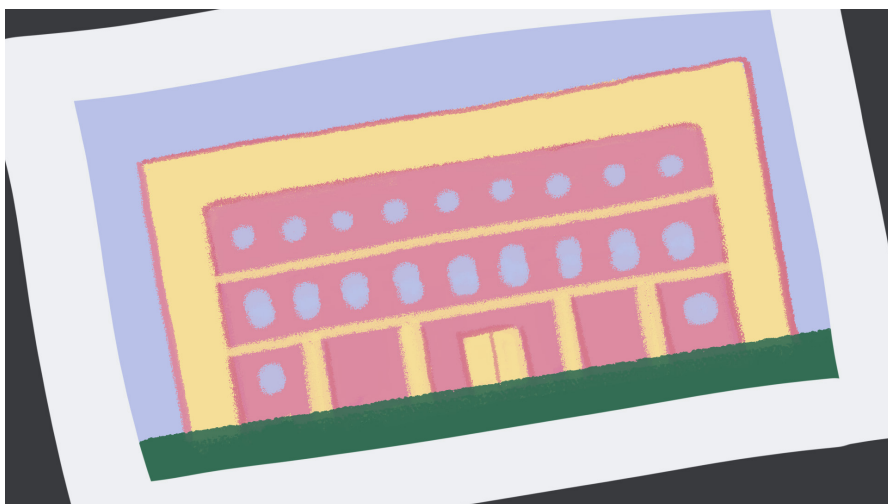


Figure 1a, 1b



photograph events in person, Principal Liu instead took screenshots of his online group chats, online educational presentations, and video meetings with his peers. Learning the different techniques needed to edit images taken in this way, he then used a variety of screenshots to create videos to share with his peers.

Centring Participants' Learning and Knowledge

In the animation, we consider Principal Liu's self-driven digital artmaking as a form of lifelong learning (Figure 1). This emphasizes his ongoing artistic

practice and aims to disrupt the hierarchy between researchers and the non-professional or amateur artists that we collaborate with. In this research, we prioritized process over product, foregrounding Principal Liu's artistic process and experience at the core of his storytelling rather than the end products (a series of videos) he made. Valuing a senior participant's knowledge and learning as equally important to a professional educator's content is especially impactful for seniors, who may face more barriers to having their voices heard (Manohar & Ruhle, 2021). Listening to Principal Liu's experiences, we sought to understand what *he* found important to share with us, trying not to arrive with a story in our heads based on what

we learned from scholarly literature. Spending time listening to unique stories from different positionalities also allowed us to foster a more inclusive community space that invited diverse perspectives to become known. Since the stories and experiences of marginalized individuals are usually less accessible, our digital narrative intends to let immigrant seniors take ownership of the directions of their stories as a way to foster a stronger sense of social inclusion and communal identity.

Reducing Barriers to Storytelling

Storytelling can become a useful methodology for sharing intergenerational knowledge (Davidson & Davidson, 2018), since this type of knowledge and learning is often qualitative and non-linear. Through focusing on an individual story, we sought to understand and represent how Principal Liu's unique experiences play a role in the way he participates in digital artmaking in his community. Language differences can often be a barrier for immigrants, so to centre his voice in *Connecting During Covid*, we decided that his narration for the video should be in his first language, Mandarin. To enable a larger audience to hear this story, we included both Mandarin captions and English subtitles. Navigating the space between



Figure 2a, 2b





Figure 3

members—becomes a form of active citizenship.

We also wanted the social aspect of Principal Liu’s practice to be reflected in the animated video by first establishing his photography and video-making practice pre-pandemic (Figure 3). The pandemic resulted in social isolation, but new opportunities for different community activities and interactions emerged. While Principal Liu spoke to the challenge of learning to use the new technology, both to connect with his peers and to continue creating his videos, the result is a significant source of online documentation of community activities that previously did not exist.

Encouraging Community Participation

For Principal Liu, artistic process is very much entangled with online community engagement with his friends. Principal Liu’s active participation in online chatting platforms was through MOSAIC. Being aware of the spread of fake news and misinformation about COVID-19, Principal Liu placed his trust in the professionals invited by MOSAIC and was keen to learn from health-related workshops organized by MOSAIC. For him, it was important

the two languages also drew attention to the dynamic between us as researchers and participants, where researchers have the power and the responsibility to share the research in a way that honours the participants.

Various scholars recognize the need for reflection about the learning process (Bourgault, 2018; Pahl & Pool, 2021). By asking Principal Liu questions and inviting him to share his story, we encouraged him to reflect on his artistic process. Through conversation, we reflected together as collaborators, our collective inquiry coming together as research-creation (Pahl & Pool, 2021). Thus, creating our animated video embodied the process as well as the product of this inquiry. If we look at Principal Liu’s practice through the same lens of research-creation, his videos are in themselves a form of documentation and reflection; the videos reflect on his own place within the community as well as the community in general.

Building Community

Peer-to-peer connection is another strength of progressive art education (Winner, 2022). Certainly, for Principal Liu, his self-guided learning was

supported by the community. Sharing artwork and receiving feedback from peers can provide motivation to continue learning and creating. Aside from allowing Principal Liu to connect to his peers and to reflect on how he views his community, the artwork he shares also allows his peers to be acknowledged as active members of the community. They are literally able to see themselves in his artwork and may be invited to reflect on how others see them as individuals. By celebrating the members without focusing only on one individual, the videos also build a sense of community identity. Individuals are placed within the context of collective community activities, fostering a sense of belonging. In these ways, Principal Liu’s artwork—created for his community and community

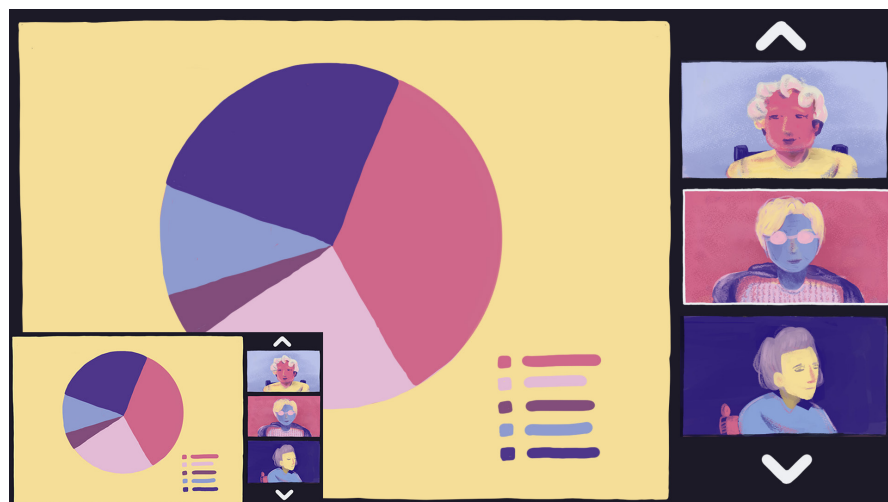


Figure 4



Figure 5

experiences, where internal or external experiences continue even after the original activity. We argue that digital artmaking is effective due to its generative potential; by using this to document communities, like Principal Liu’s, we can facilitate more community activities and dialogue since community members will be motivated to connect through seeing themselves in the artwork.

Viewing Multiple Identities

When depicting Principal Liu and his peers in *Connecting During Covid*, we wanted to visually represent them in a way that acknowledges their diversity. The visual style became dependent on a limited colour palette that did not include skin tones, but the figures were still depicted in ways that could allow a viewer to racially identify the figures (Figure 5). Due to the subjective nature of art, ABR has the unique potential to create room for a multiplicity of interpretations (Cerceo et al., 2022). We approached gender and age in a similar way, whereby someone might interpret a figure based on their own positionality. We view this ability— to see digital narratives from multiple positionalities and arrive at different understandings— as a strength. To increase inclusivity, we also chose to represent seniors with diverse abilities: for example, through the depiction of hearing aids, glasses, wheelchairs, canes, and walkers (Figure 6). Working with immigrant

to include the community service and support provided by MOSAIC in his story, as he felt his trust in and relationship with MOSAIC allowed him to navigate information and concerns during the pandemic.

Throughout the process of creating *Connecting During Covid*, we continually engaged in a dialogue with Principal Liu, hearing his story and incorporating his feedback into the making of this animation. Doing ABR with Principal Liu has enabled us to shift our thinking about art-making as a solitary practice to one which focuses on connection with the self and others (Pahl & Pool, 2021). Principal Liu’s digital art-making appears to be his response to community activities, such as online information sessions regarding health, wellness, and Covid-19 (Figure 4). Immigrant seniors are more likely to encounter barriers when trying to access not only social support but online platforms with

reliable information (Frank, 2020). Through community service agencies like MOSAIC, Principal Liu and his friends were able to learn and share without worrying much about the accuracy of the COVID-19 information; thus, they were able to create a social support network that encouraged critical thinking around responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Allowing others in the online space to feel seen and included encourages continued engagement and mutual support. Knowing that their presence is noticed and appreciated, other community members are more likely to continue showing up and supporting each other, thus fostering community wellbeing and shared community identity.

Connecting During Covid similarly provides a means of representation that can impact community activity. Artist Danny Wildemeersch (2019) posits that effective community education practices create generative



Figure 6a, 6b

seniors, it was crucial to acknowledge their diverse ways of navigating the world.

Visualizing Inclusivity & Diversity

Principal Liu also spoke of engaging with his peers in conversations about the environmental and cultural differences between Vancouver and China, from where they had emigrated. It became clear that cultural backgrounds, such as foods and holidays, were talked about, supported, and celebrated within the community online. To show this in the animation, we included visuals of various foods

and topics (Figure 7). This was done to show understanding for the intersection of multiple identities—they were not just immigrants or seniors—and we aimed to represent a multitude of interests, concerns, and cultural identities without assuming that we had touched upon every aspect. Through the process of finding ways to create a visually inclusive animated video, we were cognizant of the way our own background and identities as immigrant researchers contributed to how we understood ourselves and others. Actively exploring ways to represent a diverse range of identities, dynamics, and experiences encouraged us as researchers to remain curious about our participants’ other diverse experiences and knowledge.

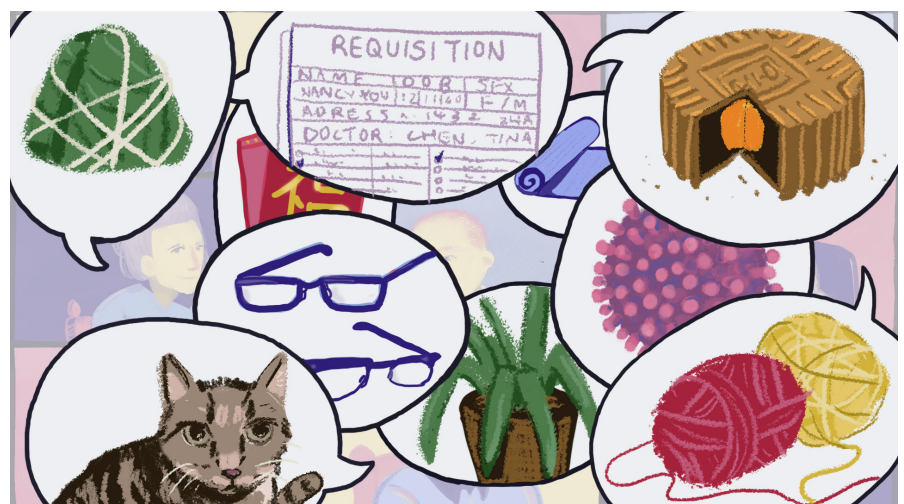
ABR provided a useful way to open this dialogue without prescribing a specific outcome, due to the interpretative nature of visual art and storytelling.

Conclusion: Collaborative Artmaking as a Social Practice

Knowledge within marginalized communities, such as those of immigrant seniors, can be difficult to access and share. With the aim of lowering this barrier, *Connecting During Covid* tells the story of Principal Liu’s artistic practice within the context of his community. Principal Liu’s digital artmaking acts as both a form of reflection about and documentation of his community. Since his learning was self-guided, we can view his artmaking as a form of active citizenship as well as an invitation for other community members to be active citizens as well. Through online chat platforms and video conferences, immigrant seniors can support and recognize each other’s creative expression. Digital artmaking which is self-directed and supported by peers increases the scope of community activities and fosters a greater sense of community identity.



Figure 7a, 7b



Through visual storytelling, *Connecting During Covid* explores the power of art, seeking to share the wealth of knowledge that can be found in immigrant senior communities and extend the reach of otherwise marginalized stories. Visual storytelling also speaks to the impact that digital narrative has on social inclusion: That is, it provides a platform for seniors to share their stories. By seeing themselves and their experiences represented, seniors can be encouraged to further reflect on and share their knowledge and experiences through their social networks. Community-engaged art is at its most effective when it facilitates self-expression within a socially marginalized group, strengthens community bonds and resilience, promotes dialogue across differences, gathers and tells untold

stories, and promotes active citizenship (Hutcheson, 2017). In our case, community-engaged art is organic, emerging, and driven by the community members through their interests with support from a community organization, MOSAIC.

Looking at the impact of *Connecting During Covid* as a creative research output, we argue for its potential to engage a wider audience beyond academic circles, inviting community members and the general public to attend to stories that might not be told in mainstream venues. In addition, this animation reveals the critical role that community support played in seniors' digital participation during the pandemic. Thus, we invite artists, educators, and community professionals to ponder their role in supporting

seniors' well-being and creativity. By supporting creative engagement that centres learners' voices and knowledge, art venues, art galleries, and community-based learning settings can contribute to creating supportive environments and trust; uplifting marginalized stories and facilitating social inclusion in community engagement. As collaborative artmaking that allows us to rethink our relationship with a research participant, this animated video became a form of social practice for articulating the notion of social inclusion through the creative process. It is Principal Liu's lived experience that enriches this work and inspires us as artist-scholars to invite the public, scholars, educators, and community professionals to rethink ways to support seniors' journey of lifelong learning through artistic engagement.

Figures



Figure 1. Stills from *Connecting During Covid* of Principal Liu learning to take photographs for his school and help his son with architectural designs. Video by authors, 2022.

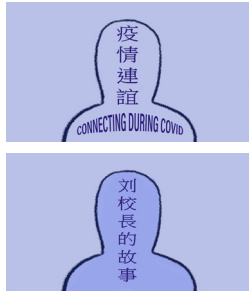


Figure 2. Stills from *Connecting During Covid* of the title sequence in Mandarin and English. Video by authors, 2022.



Figure 3. Still from *Connecting During Covid* illustrating photographs Principal Liu took at MMCC events. Video by authors, 2022.

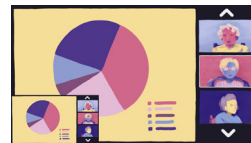


Figure 4. Still from *Connecting During Covid* of Principal Liu taking a screenshot during an online presentation. Video by authors, 2022.



Figure 5. Still from *Connecting During Covid*. Video by authors, 2022.



Figure 6. Stills from *Connecting During Covid*. Video by authors, 2022.



Figure 7. Stills from *Connecting During Covid*. Video by authors, 2022.

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