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Making our feelings matter: using creative methods to re-assemble the rules on healthy relationships education in Wales¹

by Libby, Georgia, Chloe, Courtney, Olivia and Rhiannon with Emma Renold

Introduction: the 'Relationship Matters' project

We are a group of Year 11 girls (age 16). In the autumn of 2015 three of us were invited to take part in a research project about where we felt safe and unsafe growing up and living in our Welsh valleys town Llanmerin (fictional name)ⁱ. This project was not only about listening to our views (Phase 1ⁱⁱ), it also included the opportunity to *do something* about the things that mattered to us (Phase 2) and enabled us to share our story with others through the visual arts (Phase 3).

During the first phase, some of us talked about the different forms of emotional, verbal and physical sexual harassment that can happen in school, online and in our communities. This included everything from street harassment to unwanted sexual 'banter' online or in school corridors. Professor Emma Renold from Cardiff University and Citizens Cymru asked us if we were interested in forming a group that focused on gender and sexual well-being and to work with some of the anonymised interview data from the first phase of the project to influence the educational measures of the new Violence Against Girls and Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence bill (Wales 2015). We said YES!

We met every week for 8 weeks, at lunchtime, and monthly after that. This chapter is our story of how we used arts-based methods in a group activist research project, which we called the "Relationship Matters Project". We show how we worked creatively with our own and others 'data' to bring about

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personal (e.g. in minds and bodies) and political change (e.g. in legislation and practice). Professor Renold has written about the process as making 'darta' and 'dartafacts' using theories to get us thinking about 'the emotional power of objects to ethically communicate personal experience on sensitive topics' (Renold 2016). This is our storyⁱⁱⁱ of the making of those dartafacts and what they helped us and others achieve.

Turning 'data' into 'darta'

Talk and make

All of our lunchtime sessions took place in our high school's multi-agency room. This is a room where really important decisions take place. It has a large oval 12ft conference table that we used to spread out our materials and eat around. The room looks out onto the Welsh valleys landscape, and you can sometimes spot horses grazing in the fields. We used almost all the surfaces of the room: the floor, chairs, conference table, side tables and window sills.



Figure 1: Making Room and Mind Maps

In the first few sessions, we talked about what makes a safe relationship, what kinds of sexual harassment young people face in school, online and in our communities. It was a bit awkward to start with, because we didn't think it was normal to talk about this kind of stuff with someone you didn't know. This feeling didn't last long. After a few minutes we realized that Emma had seen and heard all of the things we were sharing and more. We learnt that she had dedicated her whole career to hearing these stories from children and young people much younger than us, and there are many other projects like ours around the world^{iv}. With our permission, Emma recorded our conversations, typed up our words and we ended up using them to make lots of different things that helped us express our feelings in different ways, from tagged hearts and poems, to skirts made out of rulers.

Scream, Shout, Speak Out: making mind maps and raps

In the second session Emma brought in a large roll of thick paper which stretched beyond the entire length of the conference table. She scattered coloured marker pens around the edges and spread out the word cuttings of (anonymised) data extracts from young people's interviews in the first phase, and our typed up talk from the first session. Some of us started to use the data pieces to make mind maps and one of us, Libby, wrote a short poem, 'Scream, Shout, Speak Out'.

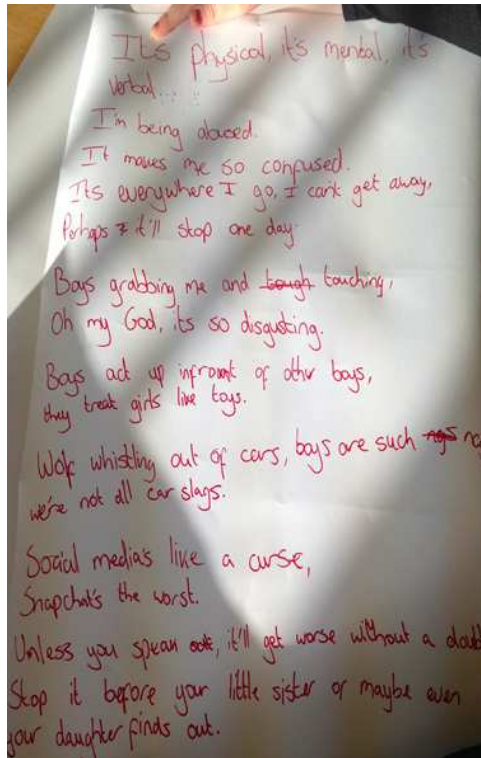


Figure 2. Scream, Shout, Speak Out

This poem took Libby only ten minutes to write. We all sat together, cwtched^v by the window, and she read it out to the group. It went down really well. We all burst into applause. It got us to start talking about how everyone keeps things to themselves, and how problems get worse if you don't speak up and share them. Sometimes you have to scream and shout about what's happening. This is how the poem got its title.

"It's soooooo fun!": Making the Run(a)way of Disrespect

spread through online and offline gossip, but in your head. Sometimes, one comment can seem bigger because it is spinning around in your mind, like a broken record (see how we used this idea in our film 'Words Won't Pin Me Down' by projecting a spinning roundabout onto our foreheads, www.productivemargins.com). In many ways our whole way of working, especially in the early sessions, was about how ideas can runaway with themselves. We return to the idea of what Emma and her team have started to think about as 'Runaway Methodologies' at the end of the chapter.

"They use rulers to lift up our skirts": making the ruler skirt

In our second meeting, a few of us talked about how some boys use rulers to lift up girls' skirts. As soon as the words had been spoken, one of us wrote it down in capital letters: "RULER TOUCHING". Emma encouraged us to think about what else the ruler could do. Here is an extract of how we began to play around with the word ruler, and how we might transform the ruler from an object used to sexually harass girls, to an object for change:

Ruler touching!

EMMA: We could bring in some rulers, do something with those rulers ... do something else with them?

We could do/

EMMA: Change their meaning/does that make sense?

Yeah

We could do a poster for that (makes the action of sticking a ruler up a skirt) like/ with a ruler

We could do a statue or something

EMMA: A statue made out of rulers?

Yeah

Yeah like paper maché and stick rulers/ through it

Rulers are used for ... rulers are used for measuring not touching

(Laughter)

Yeah because the boys touch, like they touch you with the rulers

And up her skirt

EMMA: and there's the word rule in ruler

Rule her

RULE HER!! (louder)

Rule her with your ruler

(Transcribed talk, Session 2)

We started to think about how girls' experiences of sexual harassment are often ruled out (e.g. hushed up, or felt as normal); how schools are not 'measuring up' because they don't address these issues very well; and how being, or being like, a girl or woman have been ruled and regulated throughout history, and now! We surprised ourselves at how powerful the image of the ruler became in this moment. Very quickly, we all wanted to bend the rules, re-write the rules.

Emma brought in printed paper rulers and acrylic rulers. We began to write all the negative things we wanted to stop and some positive things that we wanted to start happening (e.g. 'respect'). We began to make a paper chain from the paper rulers, and this later became known as the 'shame chain', as we chose rulers with words that are used to shame and humiliate girls.



Figure 4. Shame Chain



Figure 5. Ruler Graffiti

But what would we do with the acrylic rulers? We thought about ruler bunting or making a ruler monster, but then we suddenly started talking about wearing the rulers, and from a cape to decorating a suit jacket, we returned to the skirt. The ruler-skirt was a way of making visible the hurtful and often hidden experiences that can happen to girls and turn them into something positive – something that might raise awareness of these issues.



Figure 6. Ruler Skirt

We had no idea that the rulers would become such a significant part of our creative activism for making a better relationships education. The ruler-skirt has been worn by us and Emma in so many different places: at school assemblies; at

the Welsh Assembly, at the 2015 Welsh Women's Aid conference; at the 2015 International Day of the Girl Conference (<http://www.fullcircleeducation.org/giving-girls-fairer-chance/>); at the Welsh Government's all Wales safeguarding in education conference which focused on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence; at the launch of AGENDA (see Renold 2016); and at UK and European academic, practitioner and arts-based events (see productivemargins.com).

"Some feelings are difficult to talk about": Making the Tagged Heart

Some feelings are too difficult or painful to put into words. Sometimes all we have are our feelings, like a lump in our throat, or a churning in our stomachs. To help us express these feelings in different ways, and not through language, Emma read out some of the words and phrases (from our group discussions and interviews) that we found hurtful, and suggested we use the pile of printed paper ruler to show how we feel. We ended up scrunching and ripping the paper. In 10 minutes we had created a big pile of torn pieces. We talked about how these pieces were not just like our feelings, they were our feelings:

It's like, it's better to get your anger out on something.

It's like a sense of relief for me.

Emma: A sense of relief?

Yeah ... how you react like ... your feelings ... rips them up and crumples them up until there's practically nothing left and you're left in pieces. And I reckon using paper is actually a good way of expressing that.

Emma: So you're thinking about your feelings inside the paper?

My feelings ARE the piece of paper.

Emma: Are the piece of paper?

Like crumpled up, torn up into little tiny pieces.

(Transcribed talk, Session 3)



Figure 7: Paper Feelings

We didn't want to throw our feelings away so we thought out loud what to do with them. Some of us wanted to keep them. Others wanted to bin them. But putting them in bin was like chucking our feelings away. One of us noticed that the bin in the room was a recycling bin, which sparked the following conversation:

Recycle them!

Yeah, so you're doing something good with so you're.... something good...

Emma: Well, we've got sellotape (sticky-tape), I've got some prit-stick (glue) I've got colours.

Stick them all back together.

It's going to be hard because

Nothing can

Nothing mends

Oh my god, why don't you stick them together into a shape of a heart?

Oh yeah.

Emma: What made you think that? Just then?

Because she was on about feelings, her feelings and...

You can't really fix a heart.

I know but it won't be ...

(Transcribed talk, Session 3)

After taping all the torn pieces into the shape of a heart, we then decorated the outside:

You could put like a crack down the middle. Split down the middle.

Emma: You can.

So like all broken hearts can be mended, it might take time like but....

We could draw a clock

Emma: A clock?

Yeah, because it takes time.

In the space of 30 minutes we had recycled our feelings and created another powerful darafact, which we later called The Tagged Heart.

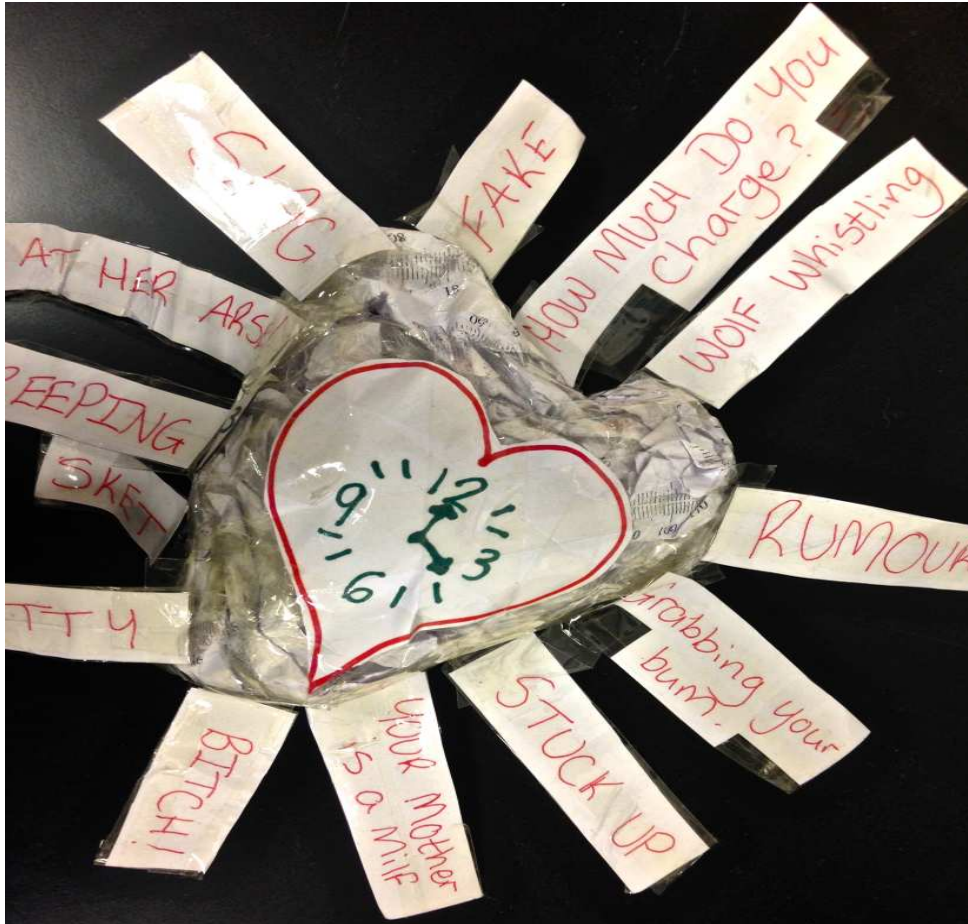


Figure 8: Tagged HeART

It was really important to us that the clock has cracks on it, and that you can see that the heart is made from the torn and crumpled paper, because no matter how many times you say sorry, or try to straighten something out, the marks will always be there. Not all feelings or broken hearts can be mended. But sometimes you can recycle the good things, and you can learn from them, and learn from the past. Our Tagged Heart is carrying all our difficult feelings, our crushed feelings. For us, our heart, is our core. It is *who we are*. It is what keeps us *alive*.

And so, over a couple of sessions, we had created range of dartafacts – all of them sparked from a process which none of us could have predicted at the outset. It was now time to share both our process, and our dartafacts with others.

Re-assembling the Rules: sharing our dartafacts in school assemblies

Fired up by what we had created, we were now ready to share with the wider school. A whole school assembly was the way we wanted to do it. At the beginning of the project, we weren't sure about speaking on these issues in assemblies, but we felt empowered by our dartafacts and we wanted students and staff not only to feel how we feel when they are subjected to everyday sexual harassment, but how this form of harassment is so often ruled out as "banter" and seen as normal.

Assemblies are formal. They are also high status and supported by heads of years and senior management. Usually nothing much happens in school assemblies. There's a lot of being *talked at*. We wanted to make our assembly interactive. So we set about working with Emma to inject some movement and participation into our assembly, not just by sharing our story and dartafacts, but by inviting students to have the chance to join our 'Relationship Matters' campaign for a "better and real relationships education". We designed and delivered two school assemblies (age 11-14) to over 300 pupils.

Experimenting with the usual format of our school assembly, we arranged the space so that students' first point of contact was with one of our dartafacts: the 17ft 'Runway of Disrespect'. Arriving early, we rolled it out and made a barrier with the chairs so that as students entered the assembly hall they had to walk by, look down on and read the words on the runway before taking their seats (we got special permission to do this, given the graphic nature of some of the words). Next, we put two slips of paper and a coloured felt tip was placed on each of the student chairs (over 150 of them!): one slip had the printed rulers on one side and the heading, "we need a healthy relationships education because ..." was on the other. This slip connected directly to our campaign. The second slip was blank. Finally, the PowerPoint screen projected a super-size image of the Tagged Heart, and two large heart shaped foil helium balloons were gently swaying mid-air. The stage was set!

Over the next 20 minutes we shared our story and the making of our dartafacts. It was nerve racking because we didn't know how students or staff were going to

react. Some of us were more nervous than others, so only those who felt comfortable in doing the talking led the presentation. Students were invited to listen, watch, read, touch and feel them. We read out the poem “Scream Shout Speak Out”, taking one line each. Individual volunteers were asked to sound out the words and phrases on the rulers and the shame chain. This wasn’t easy to do as words were hand written (and not so neat!), and on the ruler-skirt they could be back to front. But the fact that the messages are difficult to read was an important part of the process – it got across how experiences of sexual harassment can be hard to hear and talk about.

Other interactive elements were more inclusive and involved everyone. We passed our Tagged Heart around the whole assembly and asked students to “look after our feelings” because “these are our feelings”. We were worried that the heart might get trashed, but everyone was really careful and we got it back in one piece, even after being handled by a couple of hundred students.

At the end of the assembly, students were invited to take part in the ‘Relationship Matters’ campaign and share their thoughts in writing on “*why they think a real relationships education should be compulsory for all schools in Wales*”. Lots of students wrote comments which we later included in a lobbying letter to politicians that we posted on the Violence Against Women and Girls Action Group’s website.



Figure 9: Relationship Matters School Assembly

Students were also asked to comment on what they felt about our assembly. These messages were really powerful. We got comments that said how proud they were of how we were standing up and speaking out about these issues and how we acknowledged that both boys and girls get upset about hearing these comments. Some people apologized for not realizing how much their comments hurt and some shared their own experiences of sexual harassment. Other comments asked for advice and support on particular issues. There wasn't one comment that ridiculed what we were doing. We were so impressed not only by the respectful ways students responded to our assembly, but in their messages to us, and for our campaign. And while we weren't collecting comments from teachers, one teacher came over after the assembly to share her story about similar things that had happened to her when she was younger. The head of year and head teacher also publicly shared their support for our campaign, and praised the creative ways in which we were raising awareness of these issues.

As our assembly drew to a close, we invited students to stamp on the 'Runway of Disrespect' as loudly and roughly as they wanted to. We were keen that students not only to get an opportunity to take part in some of the activities we created to

make these issues matter, but also to have a physical outlet and inject a bit of fun into what are serious issues to begin the day with!

Ruling the Senedd: how our ruler-heART activism informed national policy

The ruler-slips, the hearts, and the ruler-skirt all informed the design of our creative activism. Our aim was to influence policy makers who were failing to respond to research evidence on the voices and experiences of children and young people (Renold 2013) by weakening or withdrawing many of the original preventative education measures at earlier stages of the bill. On February 18th we took part in some direct action, led by Emma and Jonathan Cox from Citizen Cymru^{vi}. Together with over 40 other young people from urban and rural south Wales, we spent a day making personal Valentine cards. It was so great to see so many different people from so many different places take part in this action. The cards included a list of our recommendations of what we wanted the new bill to include and a policy poem, with lines written from each participating school:

It's not too late

Roses are red

Violets are blue

It's not too late

For me and you

To change the law

That can change our lives

And end the violence

So we can survive and thrive

We need pupil champions

We need proper teacher training

We need a real relationships education

To stop girl shaming and boy blaming

*So when it's time to vote
Please think of our ode
We need you to take action
Because you're in control*

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
Respect and Consent
Are about policy change too*

Three ruler slips from our own school's listening campaign joined hundreds more ruler-slips (as Emma had opened up the 'Relationship Matters' activism to two other schools). Each slip was pasted to hang from a cut-out heart inside a red valentines card. It was really important to us that these were real comments, not photocopies, not typed up. They were personal. They were messages from the heart – messages that would swing out when the card was opened. But would they swing the politicians into action?



Figure 10: Valentine Card Action

Each card was placed in a personally addressed envelope to all 60 assembly members. They were then sealed with a red lipstick kiss to connect our local action to the global Violence Against Girls and Women campaign, *Red My Lips*. We took the train down to the National Assembly for Wales at the Senedd, Cardiff Bay and hand delivered the cards for the assembly members to pick up the next day.

Over the coming weeks, we worked with Emma and the Violence Against Girls and Women Action group to proactively organize and participate in national media coverage, including a twitter campaign. As the bill was about to be voted on for the final time Emma tweeted all the assembly members for us. She asked

them if they received our valentine cards, and what did they think? Many sent through their comments, and some posted a picture proudly holding their card.

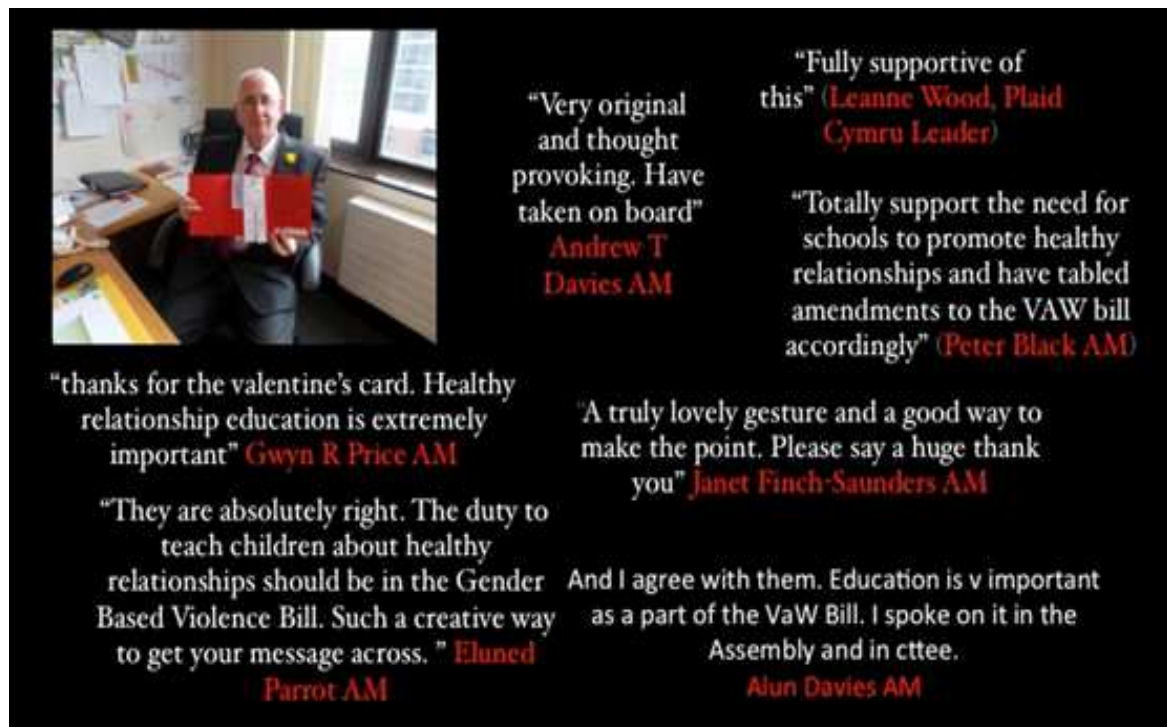


Figure 11: Twitter Activism

While we will never really know if our creative activism and public campaign directly affected the dramatic u-turn in the policy-making process at the ninth hour, we believe from personal communication with one of the assembly members, Jocelyn Davies, (chair of the 'Violence Against Women and Children' cross-party group) that we did make a difference^{vii}. The bill was passed on Tuesday 10th March. It included many of our education amendments for better teacher training; a whole education guidance for practitioners and a national advisor to make sure everything in the Act happens.

We are really proud to have been part of the campaign, and to be listened to. As our poem says, "respect and consent is about policy change too". We hope that we have helped begin to re-write the rules for a better relationships education in Wales that puts gender equalities and children and young people's own experiences at the heart of change. In fact, since the Act gained royal assent in the summer, we have had the opportunity to develop our activities further in the

making of the art exhibition and film 'Graphic Moves' with professional artists Heloise Godfrey-Talbot, Rowan Talbot and Seth Oliver (see productivemargins.com) and more members of the team, Gabrielle Ivinson and Eva Elliott. This phase involved working more with our dartafacts and the messages they carry.



Figure 12: Dartafacts in 'Graphic Moves' Exhibition

Our story has also been used as a case study for how young people can use creative methods and the visual arts to raise awareness and campaign for change in two Welsh Government relationships education resources for practitioners (Welsh Government 2015) and young people (AGENDA: A young people's guide to making positive relationships matter, Renold 2016). We recently submitted this case study to the Women and Equalities Select Committee's (2016) Inquiry into Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools^{viii} as evidence on the importance of creative approaches to sex and relationships education.

Words won't pin us down

Being part of the Relationship Matters project has been a life changing experience, not just for us, but for others we hope too. We have learnt so much in the making and doing and we really hope more workshops and projects like these can happen for more young people. Using *runaway methods* in which anything can happen and where ideas can flow into and make dartafacts that can affect people really gets to the heart of how change can happen. Change in us, and change in others. It is good to have a plan and something to aim for, like raising awareness about an issue. But it is also good to plan for the unexpected. Who knew we would make a ruler-skirt or a tagged heart!

While sexual harassment has not gone away, we don't think being called names or asked to do stuff is normal. It's wrong. We can talk about it more openly, and we don't take it so personally. We feel like a bigger person. Where before we might have felt shamed and would look down. Now we hold our heads up. We have more confidence in ourselves, in our bodies. Some of us have begun to share that confidence with others, and we hope to continue to do so now we have left high school, by running workshops for students in primary and secondary schools supported by teachers and the new young people's guide AGENDA.

The poem we wrote for the short film, "Words won't pin me down" is how we would like to end this chapter. The last line gets to the heart of how the making of dartafacts can help us express what is so difficult to talk about. Experience and change is both personal and about us, but also collective, and more than us.

Words Won't Pin Me Down

you shouted something to me
and i wanted to fight back
I was too afraid
I thought you would attack

don't judge me
don't rule me
don't read me
don't beep me

until you've walked a mile
in my shoes
but even then
you'll never know
what I've been through

talk to me
listen to me
understand me
feel what I feel

a conversation doesn't hurt nobody
in fact
it might make me
a little less angry

FEEL WHAT I FEEL

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ⁱ This project was funded by the ESRC/AHRC programme, “Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement” (ES/K002716/1). For further details about the project and programme, see www.productivemargins.com.

ⁱⁱ You can read more about the findings of the research project and how we used ipads and geographic information system (GIS) technology to show and share with the research team local areas where we felt safe and unsafe on the research programme website (productivemargins.com, see also Thomas 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ This chapter has been produced over several stages. As a group we created a written script for our school assembly, facilitated by Emma Renold. This script told the story of the Relationship Matters project in our own words. This script was expanded each time our project and activism developed. It has been shared by us, and through posters, at different events, conferences and exhibitions (see productivemargins.com). We used the most recent version of the story to reflect upon the process, and two of the team (Libby and Georgia) worked for a full day with Emma to develop the chapter. Libby and Georgia annotated each section (which Emma had laminated on A3 paper) and we recorded our conversation. Emma then wrote up the first draft of what we had created in the session. This draft was then edited and passed around the group before Emma gave it the final once over and submitted to the editor of this collection, Nancy Lombard.

^{iv} For case study examples around the world, see Renold (2016); for inter-generational feminist activisms, see Taft and Gordon (2016), Brown (2016) and Edell et. al. (2016); for gender activism and feminist school-based networks, see the Gender Equalities Leadership in Schools (GELS) network; and for examples of academic scholarship theorizing young feminist activisms, see Taft (2010, 2014), Keller (2015), Mendes (2015) and Ringrose and Renold (2015; forthcoming 2018)

^v Cwtch is a familiar welsh term that can mean cuddle or hug.

^{vi} Citizen Cymru Wales is a registered charity that “builds diverse alliances of communities organising for power, social justice and the common good”. They have members from over a hundred organisations, including young people. Thank you to all that helped make this happen, including Matthew Abraham, Siriol Burford, Victoria Edwards and Gareth Thomas.

^{vii} Watch one of the assembly members, Jocelyn Davies, talk about the impact of the Valentine card research-activist practice informing the educational amendments to the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act (2015) here: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/339289-impact-on-policy-award-welsh-government-with-the-school-of-social-sciences> (accessed 8 July 2016).

^{viii} For the final ‘special report’ of the Women and Equalities Select Committee into Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools, see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/9102.htm>