

FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN VIRTUAL REALITY WITH *DRAW FOR CHANGE!* EXISTIMOS, RESISTIMOS: DIDACTIC POTENTIAL AND IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

Este artículo examina el potencial didáctico del cortometraje interactivo de realidad virtual *Existimos, Resistimos* (*We Exist, We Resist*, 2023). Disponible en cuatro idiomas, esta aplicación de RV aborda la violencia de género y la resistencia feminista a través del arte.

El estudio se basa empíricamente en el análisis de experiencias subjetivas recogidas en dos seminarios universitarios de didáctica en la formación del profesorado de español, así como en datos cualitativos y cuantitativos sobre las valoraciones del estudiantado acerca de la película y su experiencia de inmersión.

Los resultados muestran un notable potencial para fomentar la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible y el aprendizaje intercultural, junto con un alto grado de inmersión durante la recepción, al tiempo que ponen de relieve la necesidad de una adecuada mediación didáctica. Asimismo, se presentan orientaciones concretas para su integración didáctico-metodológica en contextos educativos escolares y universitarios.

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1. Introduction

The award-winning multilingual Virtual Reality (VR) short film *We Exist, We Resist* (Flanders Image, 2023), created by Venezuelan filmmaker Mariana Cadenas Sangronis as part of the *DRAW FOR CHANGE!* series, opens up new perspectives for the use of immersive and interactive media, not only in Spanish language education.

The *DRAW FOR CHANGE!* series follows six courageous female cartoonists from Mexico, Russia, India, Syria, Egypt, and the United States in their everyday lives, addressing issues such as discrimination against women, women's rights, freedom of the press, and female representation in politics and society. The films combine documentary elements with cartoons and animation. *We Exist, We Resist* is currently the only VR film in the series. Project website: <https://drawforchangetheseries.com/>

The VR experience centers on the Mexican cartoonist Mariana Lorenzo, known as Maremoto, who uses street art and illustration to make feminist issues visible in public space. Through her artistic work, Maremoto not only challenges sexism and advocates for empowerment and body positivity, but also seeks to raise awareness of latent misogyny, violence against women, and the everyday occurrence of feminicides¹ in Mexico. Although the *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* came into force in Mexico in 2007, aiming to guarantee women a life free from violence, Amnesty International (2025, p. 43) reports 3,427 killings of women in 2024, of which at least 829 were classified as feminicides. Against this background, both Maremoto's work and the VR short film *We Exist, We Resist* are of particular relevance².

Title: DRAW FOR CHANGE! We Exist, We Resist (Existimos, Resistimos)
Concept and direction: Mariana Cadenas Sangronis
Year of release: 2023
Country of production: Belgium
Production companies: Clin d'oeil films, Castar, Benuts Flanders
Medium: Virtual Reality, 360°
Duration: 15 minutes
Available languages: Spanish, English, French, Dutch

“In line with the UNO Sustainable Development Goal 5, Gender Equality, the film combines authentic language with visually powerful messages.”

2. Narrative structure of *We Exist, We Resist*

Participants are immersed in the everyday life of the cartoonist Maremoto in Mexico City through a Virtual Reality headset. The interactive VR film combines factual and fictional elements that serve informative as well as appellative and aesthetic functions.

The first scene immediately prompts interaction: participants are required to extinguish an animated fire, which symbolically represents the situation of women in Mexico. In the background, lamenting female voices can be heard alongside Maremoto's voice-over, which provides information about the extent and everyday nature of violence against women in Mexico. Scene two transports users into Maremoto's apartment in a 360° environment, where they can interact with images and painting materials while gaining insights into her artistic work and the motivations behind her activism. In the third scene, Maremoto is shown reclaiming public space through her art, while simultaneously being subjected to verbal and sexual harassment. The fourth scene is fully animated: at night, disembodied eyes and speech bubbles containing suggestive remarks approach the participant in an open street setting. A shadow draws increasingly closer, requiring user reaction. The final scene places participants in the midst of a demonstration on International Women's Day. Throughout the VR experience, Maremoto's voice accompanies the user—at times accusatory, at times angry, and ultimately hopeful that the situation of women in Mexico can improve.

3. Didactic potential

3.1. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

In line with the UNO Sustainable Development Goal 5, *Gender Equality*, the film combines authentic language with visually powerful messages that encourage engagement with issues of social and gender justice. It also contributes to intercultural learning by providing insights into urban culture in Mexico, linking global and local discourses on gender roles, and demonstrating how artistic resistance can function as a form of communication. Not least due to its immersive nature, the VR experience generates a strong affective impact.

3.2. Virtual Reality as an immersive and interactive medium

We Exist, We Resist represents a compelling example of the didactic added value of VR films in foreign language education (see Wengler & Rempel, 2026). Such environments create authentic opportunities for communication, foster text and media literacy as well as intercultural communicative competence, and open up new experiential spaces for participation and perspective-taking (see Martingano et al., 2021; Higgins et al., 2024).

In contrast to traditional film, VR enables not only multimodal but multisensory experiences. The use of VR thus intensifies these potentials through immersive engagement. VR environments have been shown to enhance cognitive absorption and retention (Hsu, 2024), while immersion and spatial presence are closely linked to learners' motivation and situational interest (Figueroa & Jung, 2025). Building on this, Lin (2025) demonstrates that immersion and the

- 1 The term *feminicidio*, commonly used in Mexico, emphasizes the political and societal dimension of the (often unpunished) killing of women on the basis of their gender as a mass crime, in contrast to the term *femicide* (see Amnesty International, 2025, p. 43).
- 2 Another television documentary, *Draw for Change – We Are Fire!*, about the cartoonist Maremoto (original language: Spanish), is available on ARTE in German and French until January 2027: <https://www.arte.tv/de/videos/113646-002-A/zeichnen-aus-protest/>

"We Exist, We Resist represents a compelling example of the didactic added value of VR films in foreign language education."

- 3 The language of instruction was Spanish. The learning objectives of this unit were as follows:
- Students are able to describe SDG 5 and identify (global) aspects of gender inequality. They understand the causes of gender inequality and its consequences. (level of cognitive demand I)
 - Students are familiar with the situation regarding violence against women (particularly in Mexico) and are able to identify different forms of machista violence. (level of cognitive demand II)
 - Students are able to critically analyze individual and societal prejudices related to sexual identity or gender and relate them to the concepts of Global Learning, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and Global Citizenship Education (GCE). (levels of cognitive demand II/III)
 - Students are able to develop didactic tasks, methods and activity formats for Spanish language teaching based on a Virtual Reality application in the context of SDG 5, drawing on the concepts of Global Learning, ESD, and GCE. (level of cognitive demand III)
- 4 Using *Mentimeter*, various everyday situations involving discrimination typically experienced by women were presented. The male students in the course were asked to estimate how many of the female students had already experienced each situation and were also invited, on a voluntary basis, to indicate whether they themselves had encountered similar situations. Subsequently, the actual number of affected participants was determined through an anonymous survey among the female students. In both courses, the number of affected individuals was underestimated in most cases.

associated sense of presence are positively related to learning outcomes and closely connected to motivational processes and flow experiences. Wei et al. (2025) further show in a systematic review that presence functions as a key mechanism in VR-based learning, influencing learning processes through mediating factors such as increased attention, motivation, and cognitive engagement, with effects that are task-dependent and particularly pronounced in interactive and collaborative contexts.

Against this background, particular attention should be paid to the interplay between (inter)activity and inactivity, as well as between powerlessness and activist empowerment, in *We Exist, We Resist*. While the protagonist's sphere of action and activist influence gradually expands over the course of the film—from the apartment, where she initially paints alone, to the side street, where she works as part of a team, and finally to downtown Mexico City, where she becomes part of a demonstration with thousands of women—the users remain physically present within these 360-degree environments, yet are confined to an observing and inactive position. It is only in the animated cartoon sequences, which symbolically reflect Maremoto's activist stance, that users are able to intervene interactively. Paradoxically, however, precisely these action-oriented scenes generate a particularly oppressive sense of powerlessness: although users can actively respond and influence individual elements, they are ultimately confronted with the experience that the depicted structures of violence and inequality cannot be resolved through isolated (inter)actions. The VR experience thus stages feminist activism as an ambivalent interplay of participation, limitation, and affective overload.

4. Implementation in practice

4.1. Experiences from university teacher education

We Exist, We Resist was implemented once in each of two university-level courses within Spanish teacher education (advanced didactics module): *360° Globales Lernen (Global Learning)* (summer semester 2025) and *Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible con Realidad Virtual* (winter semester 2025/26). In both cases, the VR experience was embedded in a teaching unit on SDG 5, *Gender Equality*³.

The VR experience was prepared through a session on discriminatory language, the definition of different forms of violence, and background information on the situation of (violence against) women in Mexico, as well as an adapted version of the *violentrómetro*⁴ as a tool to raise awareness of everyday discrimination.

Following the VR session, students developed their own teaching materials for the application, drawing on prior instruction in working with audiovisual texts and fostering listening/viewing comprehension. In the course *360° Globales Lernen* (summer semester 2025), the director Mariana Cadenas participated as a guest speaker, gave a short talk, and answered students' questions after the VR experience. The discussions following the VR session in both courses were highly productive and lively.

Not only did the VR application itself serve as a stimulus for discussion, but observations of students' interactions with the application also opened up important spaces for reflection. In one particular scene, many students showed physical reactions: several female students raised their arms protectively in front of their bodies, while one male student actively attempted to fend off the virtual harasser. These reactions were subsequently discussed on a meta-level and were interpreted by the students in relation to gender-specific socialization and personal experiences of violence. The male student described the scene as threatening and expressed surprise at the rather passive reactions of the female students, who explained these as learned protective strategies aimed at avoiding escalation.

Against this background, many students argued in favor of introducing the VR application at an early stage in school education, particularly to foster perspective-taking among boys and to encourage reflection on their own behavior. At the same time, the need to strengthen girls through targeted self-defense training was emphasized. However, it was also critically noted that the application might be perceived as too intense by some learners and that particular sensitivity on the part of teachers is required, especially when working with students who have experienced violence. Accordingly, the use of a content warning prior to the VR experience, as implemented in the courses, was considered appropriate.

4.2. Didactic and instructional integration

In addition to its integration into university-level didactics courses with a focus on ESD/GCE/democracy education, the VR application can also be incorporated into courses on intercultural or transcultural learning, as well as into seminars on working with audiovisual texts and media. The scope and depth of the linguistic, textual, and content-related analysis depend on the available instructional time. Courses in literary and cultural studies are also particularly suitable, for example as an extension of work with (activist) comics. In regional and cultural studies or language practice courses, the application can be used in connection with thematic focuses such as Mexico or women's rights in Latin America.

Given that the narrative is set in Mexico and the original language is Spanish, the application is particularly well suited for use in secondary-level Spanish language teaching. However, as it is also available in English, French, and Dutch, it can be integrated into other subjects as well, provided an appropriate thematic framework is established. Since the director Mariana Cadenas lives in Belgium, this also offers a point of connection for use in French and Dutch language teaching⁵. Furthermore, the application can be meaningfully incorporated into social science subjects, art classes, and interdisciplinary projects.

Regardless of the chosen didactic approach, linguistic scaffolding tailored to

the target group should precede the VR experience. The language level required for understanding *We Exist, We Resist* corresponds approximately to B1/B2. The voice-over, spoken by the cartoonist Maremoto, is delivered in a clearly comprehensible Mexican variety of Spanish. The voice-overs in the translated versions are characterized by a slight foreign accent.

For the pre-viewing phase, a range of materials (e.g., trailers, Maremoto's comics, press kits) is available online and can be used to activate prior knowledge, stimulate discussion, and encourage hypothesis formation. In this context, the artist's name Maremoto (English: seaquake) also lends itself well as a starting point for interpretative engagement.

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A particular challenge during the reception phase lies in the fact that taking notes is not possible without interrupting the immersive experience. A useful strategy is therefore to work in pairs: while one participant experiences the VR film, the other observes their reactions and takes notes, which are then discussed afterwards. Alternatively, the experiencing participant may verbalize their thoughts and emotions during the experience (think-aloud protocol), which are noted down by their partner or recorded as audio.

In addition, tasks can be assigned prior to the VR experience to guide learners' attention. However, written responses should only be produced afterwards. Differentiation is also possible by assigning different analytical foci to groups (e.g., Group A focuses on linguistic aspects, Group B on visual and/or audio elements, Group C on VR-specific interactions and affordances).

⁵ Teaching materials for the *DRAW FOR CHANGE!* project are already available in French and Dutch at <https://www.edu-drawforchange.org/FR/index.html>.

A second viewing in plenary via streaming or casting to a screen is also conceivable. If individual scenes are to be analyzed in greater depth (e.g., for detailed examination of linguistic, acoustic, or visual features), the teacher may prepare screencasts in advance that can be viewed without the need for VR headsets.

In the post-viewing phase, engagement with the film can be deepened further. For example, a guided reconstruction of the experience based on key questions can support learners' narrative competence (e.g., What did I see? What did I hear? What did I feel, and when?). Visual sketches or timelines of events or personal perceptions can also be created.

poster or comic/cartoon, or plan a campaign addressing gender inequality. These products could be shared using the hashtag *#drawforchange*, thereby contributing to real-world media discourse.

It is also conceivable to write and record an alternative voice-over for *We Exist, We Resist* or to design an additional scene. In line with the promotion of perspective-taking, this can be done from the perspective of different actors (e.g., victim perspective, observer perspective, gender perspective, political perspective). If 360-degree cameras are available, students can also create and record their own scenes (see Wengler & Rempel, 2026).

Finally, from the perspective of critical media literacy, learners can reflect on which narratives are constructed and which realities are (re)presented, as well as situate *We Exist, We Resist* within broader discourses (for further discussion, see Wengler, in press). This may also include a critical reflection on VR as a medium itself, analyzing concepts such as immersion, presence, and embodiment with regard to their intended effects.

4.3. Student evaluations and immersion experience

In addition to the discussions conducted in the seminars, student teachers ($n = 23$; convenience sample) were surveyed immediately after the VR experience using a semi-structured questionnaire administered via *LimeSurvey*. The questionnaire included items on their evaluations of the film and their immersion experience (scale adapted from Ferdig & Kosko, 2020; reliability: $\alpha = .74$). Data were analyzed using *PSPP*.

Overall, participants rated the didactic potential of *We Exist, We Resist* as high ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.92$)⁶. They considered its use in the classroom to be important ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.05$) and indicated that they would use the film in Spanish language teaching ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.20$). Participants also perceived strong potential for fostering ESD ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.02$) and for promoting empathy ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.01$). Furthermore, they reported being motivated to learn more about the topic addressed in the film ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.23$). The reported level of immersion was likewise high ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.70$).

Subsequently, key messages can be identified (informational listening/viewing comprehension), or the emotions, gestures, and facial expressions of the protagonists as well as the cartoon animations can be analyzed (aesthetic listening/viewing comprehension). For further language-focused work, lexical fields or rhetorical strategies can be examined. When used in other (foreign language) subjects, the effect of the foreign accent in the voice-over(s) and its potential influence on perceptions of authenticity, affectivity, or cultural belonging can also be explored in order to foster language awareness.

Within a task-based learning framework, students may, depending on the targeted competencies, develop a slogan, design a

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⁶ Five-point Likert scales were used.

5. Conclusion

The interactive VR film *We Exist, We Resist* proves to be a highly suitable resource for raising awareness of violence against women within the framework of SDG 5, *Gender Equality*. It can be implemented not only in university contexts but also in school settings, particularly in Spanish language education and beyond. When embedded in well-designed didactic and methodological frameworks, it offers considerable potential for fostering listening/viewing comprehension, text and media literacy, as well as intercultural communicative competence.

In addition to its motivational benefits and its contribution to the development of digital skills, the use of VR technology enables learners to experience situations in an embodied way and to practice perspective-taking and empathy through its high degree of immersion. At the same time, the findings underline the importance of sensitive pedagogical framing when working with immersive content that may be emotionally demanding.

Further research is needed to empirically substantiate these didactic potentials and to explore their impact across different learning contexts and learner groups.

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