Visual Approaches to Research

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Images above, L to R: Charles Darwin Notebook; L. King “Collages in Evaluation”; T. Lackey Midwifery research
Aims for this session

• To offer a broad overview and **practical*** introduction to some hands-on visual methods that may be useful for:
  – exploring ideas and planning your Educational Enquiry project
  – gathering qualitative research data for use in conjunction with other methods
  – *organising, analysing and communicating your results*
• *Theoretical issues addressed in other sessions apply equally to visual methods but will not be explored in any depth here.*
Some background

• LearnHigher Centre of Excellence (funded 2005-2010) was a consortium of 16 universities researching different aspects of learning development and sharing resources [http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/](http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/)
  Now part of the national Association for Learning Development in HE.

• University of Brighton led the Visual Practices area:
  – to improve understanding of the visual knowledge and skills required in different disciplines and how these are taught and assessed
  – to develop resources for students and staff

• The recently updated website is at [http://www.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning)
  includes sections on
  – Visual research methods – links to resources
  – Drawing - downloadable Drawing to Learn booklets in different subject areas – also useful for research
Key lessons from funded projects

• Visually representing abstract concepts or relationships helps **understanding** (at any level, including doctoral and post-doctoral)

• Physical making - eg drawing, tracing, copying, collage - helps **engagement & memory**

• Keeping the bigger picture in view helps us **deal with complex information**

• Constructing visual representations within a research context can trigger **richer more productive discussions**
Sketchnotes from IVCM Conference by Dr Makayla Lewis
http://makaylalewis.co.uk/2015/09/18/sketchnotes-4th-international-visual-methods-conference-2015/

See also http://www.interactivecultures.org/2015/10/international-visual-methods-conference-2015/
‘Graphic Medicine’
http://www.graphicmedicine.org/

• Al-Jawad M. Comics are Research: Graphic Narratives as a New Way of Seeing Clinical Practice. Journal of Medical Humanities. February 2013.

• PhD as graphic novel

• http://spinweaveandcut.com/
Visual Research Methods resource

https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning/visual-research-methods/
Documentary approaches

• Video/photographic data collection to record objects of study (19th century ‘realist’ documentary approach)
• Often used in sociology and anthropology, but may be less appropriate for education settings especially where teacher=researcher
• More recently, collaborative/participatory approaches where research subjects are more actively involved in production
• Issues:
  – power dynamics
  – analytic tools
  – evidential status of images (not an unproblematic reflection of reality but themselves artefacts/representations – but that is equally true of interviews and other evidence and research data )
  – Ethical procedures – normal informed consent processes and include photo/video release forms
Observation

Observation of behaviour or environment:


Other examples:

- Case (1991) investigated historians’ classification of texts, examined distribution of stacks of books and papers in their offices, made sketches of the workplace
- Michel (1992) observed objects such as signs and library aids, and physical as well as behaviour of library users searching for information

May be hard to ‘observe’ systematically while you’re teaching, but think about where and how this approach could be useful
Image elicitation

• Using images (photos, drawings, collages etc) as a trigger for discussion. These may be pre-existing images:

![Image of a lecture hall](image_url)

University of Michigan School of Natural Resources & Environment | Creative Commons

• For example, you could invite students to rank images of different types of teaching situations in order of preference, or to add speech or thought bubbles to them.
Image elicitation (continued)

• ...or those produced by the participants themselves eg:
  • Zamorski (2002) “Research-led Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A case”, Teaching in Higher Education, 7:4, 411-427 (Study recruited 12 student researchers through SU to interview fellow students...keep a journal noting ‘encounters with research’.. and, using a digital camera, to capture 12 ‘images of research’ at the University and provide a written commentary to accompany the images)
  • See also Guest (2015) “Student Perceptions of Learning, as seen through a camera lens”
    http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/methods/harper.pdf
Drawing & collage as tools for learning & research

- Recording & description
- Representing processes (eg through diagrams)
- Thinking about ideas and visualising abstract concepts
- Accessing and reflecting on ‘hard to verbalise’ experiences –
Activity 1. Visualising concepts

• *In pairs:* Draw quick pictures/diagrams to show to each other (or as if to a colleague, student or friend) what you mean by learning (2 minutes)

• In small groups, compare your drawings and discuss differences and similarities in their interpretation of this concept (5 minutes)

• How might you use this kind of activity with your own students?
“Perceptions of Illness” Big Draw staff workshop, School of Health Professions

“it showed [us] that drawing depicts concepts in a very emotionally raw way, and that people are accessing their thoughts and feelings via quite a different route than when verbalizing... iterative drawing exercises allowed us to push through one-dimensional stereotypes of particular illnesses or conditions into a more multi-faceted understanding of the relationship between illness, internal and external perceptions of illness, treatment, aftercare and identity....” (participant feedback)
Rich Picture Analysis

Originally developed as part of Peter Checkland’s Soft Systems Methodology for gathering information about a complex situation. (Checkland and Scholes, 1990).

“The idea of using drawings or pictures to think about issues is common to several problem solving or creative thinking methods (including therapy) because our intuitive consciousness communicates more easily in impressions and symbols than in words.

Drawings can both *evoke* and *record* insight into a situation, and different visualization techniques such as visual brainstorming, imagery manipulation and creative dreaming have been developed emphasizing one of these two purposes over the other (Garfield, 1976; McKim, 1980; Shone, 1984; Parker, 1990).”

[http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/t552/pages/rich/richAppendix.html](http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/t552/pages/rich/richAppendix.html)
Mapping

- Often used as a participatory research tool in relation to eg urban space, planning etc
- Can also be used in non-spatial context eg social networks

- https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/doit/techniquesapproaches/participatory-mapping

- How might you use PM to understand students’ perceptions of the university, study networks, or different teaching spaces etc?
Activity 2: Mindmapping

• *Individually:* Draw a quick mind-map of questions you might pose as part of your educational enquiry project *(2 minutes)*

• *In pairs:* Discuss each other’s ideas *(2 minutes each way)*

• Add any notes/new ideas to these during the session
...the use of image-making as a focus for discussion [...] provides researchers with a simple procedure that accesses the inner world of the informant [...] the process of expressing themselves graphically frequently enabled [participants] to talk about their experiences more lucidly...

Arts-based research

‘The arts-based paradigm states that by handing over creativity (contents of the research) and its interpretation (an explanation of the contents) to the research participant, the participant is empowered, the relationship between the researcher and the research participant is intensified and made more equal, and the contents become more culturally exact and explicit, using emotional as well as cognitive ways of knowing’


See also:

Reflecting on experience

Lackey ‘Using Art in Midwifery Research’

“A qualitative study, using illuminative art-work, exploring newly qualified midwives perceptions of transition from that of student to that of qualified midwife”

Visual Practices Conference, School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Brighton July 2008
It can be helpful to start with a few familiar visual metaphors.
Embodied Reflection

Above left: MA Inclusive Arts Practice
Initial session - ‘hopes and fears’
Below: from end of year personal development review

Above right: Access to Art Overalls Project
Collage as a tool for reflection

Above left: Hannah Hoch ‘Cut with a Kitchen Knife’ 1919-20
Above right: Photograph from a collage workshop
Collage: rationale

“When using collage reflectively, the researcher [or participant] focuses on a question, dilemma or the like, and then selects pictures that metaphorically reflect aspects of this thinking. Then operating intuitively she creates a collage, producing a visual composition with the selected fragments. This collage process breaks away from the linearity of written thoughts by working first from feelings about something to the ideas they evoke, instead of the reverse. The resulting visual juxtapositions frequently reveal new connections and understandings that have previously remained tacit.”

Activity 3: Picturing ideas

Stage 1: select images (10 -15 minutes)

- Browse through the collection of images and magazines on the table, and choose a variety of images that resonate in any way with your feelings and thoughts about research.

- This can relate to ‘research’ in general or your particular area of interest, but don’t think too hard about the task at this stage. It’s OK to choose images just because they appeal to you in some way in subject, colour or pattern. You won’t necessarily use them all in your collage pictures.
Activity 3 (continued)

• Stage 2: Construct collage (20 - 30 minutes)
  – Clear the working area of any surplus materials, and each take a large sheet of paper
  – Use some or all of your chosen images to put together a collage that - in any way that makes sense to you - relates to the theme of research and/or represents relevant ideas, feelings and connections.
  – Don’t stick your materials down too firmly to begin with – you may want to move things around
Activity 3 (continued)

• Stage 3: Discussion (30 minutes)
  – In pairs Take some time to explore each others’ collages - using open-ended prompt questions (next slide) to help you notice visual or conceptual links
  – Whole group: discussion of outcomes, shared understanding, key conceptual differences
Useful questions

• This is about noticing, not judging – some questions to start you off:
  – What are your initial impressions of your partner’s collage?
  – What general observations can you make about eg darkness /lightness, choice of colour, range of imagery, rhythm and flow?
  – What specific things do you notice in regard to:
    • Repetition?
    • Things placed next to each other or far apart?
    • What is emphasised, what is almost hidden or missing?
    • Directional or scale relationships between images?
    • Particular gaps or areas of emptiness and/or very dense areas?
  – What broader ideas or questions does the collage provoke?
  – Each person: let your partner’s observations help you to notice any less conscious aspects and relationships revealed through your collage

Based on Angela Rogers (2009) Interactive and Iterative Collage Workshop, Creativity Centre, University of Brighton
Reflective collage: some tips

• Avoid using text - this can fix and limit the potential exploration of meaning. (It may be useful to write notes when reflecting on your collage, but keep these separate, to allow for a different response next time)
• Don’t stick everything down immediately – leave room for manoeuvre – you may want to adjust the relationships between elements following discussion with your partner or private reflection.
• For a large collage, try to allow at least 30 minutes to select material, 30 to compose, and 30 to reflect on the result.
• A series of small collages (e.g. on postcards) can be a helpful way to explore a specific theme over time or for a research group to explore their various perspectives on collaborative research questions

Based on Angela Rogers (2009) *Interactive and Iterative Collage Workshop*, Creativity Centre, University of Brighton
Plenary discussion

• Sharing ideas: how might you incorporate any of these visual methods into your own research?
• Potential issues/risks/challenges?
• Solutions?
• What relevant resources /knowledge/skills can we share?
Visual Learning website:

http://www.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning

See in particular Visual Research and Drawing sections