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Documentation of Reflective and Interpretive Representation of Youth: A Study through Rudimentary Photographic Close-ups in the Context of Visual Literacy

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Abstract

This chapter demonstrates an enriched reflective and interpretive learning experience made possible by a process of close-up photography as a form of documentation prior to an artistic work in a visual literacy workshop (VLW) done by youth in the Arctic region. The results of this study have proven to be a successful tool for research in the field of representation and interpretation to support and build useful knowledge about reflective thinking for society.

Keywords: Documentation, Reflective, Interpretive, Representation, Youth (Arctic region), Visual Literacy

Background

Is there such a thing as a 'tabula rasa', which is Latin for 'a blank slate' (Wikipedia, 2021)? According to the epistemological literature by John Locke (1632–1704), individuals are born without any inbuilt mental content, so all knowledge and learning comes through experience or perception (Fuller et al., 2000). He opposes the doctrine of innatism (Winchester, 1985), which states that the mind is already born with ideas, knowledge and beliefs. Prominent philosophers like Plato argued that certain knowledge pre-exists in one's mind (Yacouba, 2016). According to Kenny (1968), Descartes supported innatism as a concept of knowledge that is universal to all mankind.

In this chapter, I intend to introduce these two opposing theories to illustrate both sides of the argument. Both doctrines and theories have their strengths and weaknesses, but when viewed from the perspective of congenital visual knowledge, not much evidence has been found. On the contrary, Noam Chomsky presented a detailed theory on innatism that focuses on language (Chomsky, 1975, 1986; Cowie, 2017), while Pinker (2003) argued that the blank slate doctrine could have done more harm than good. Therefore, a gap has been identified related to the existence of previsual knowledge.

Another strong concept favouring the tabula rasa theory is the 'nature versus nurture' theory (Plomin, 1994), which contends that human conduct is determined by environment rather than a person's qualities because one's identity is moulded by the culture they live in. For this reason, in this chapter, I discuss the role of visual literacy (VL) and how visual language and cultural representations can nurture one's visual reflexivity and interpretation. Moreover, I discuss the embodied experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1961, 2004) in this artistic experiment as a preliminary task during a visual literacy workshop (VLW; Qureshi et al., 2021) carried out in the Arctic city of Rovaniemi in Lapland, Finland. The participants ranged from ages 19 to 22 and were from the University of Lapland in Finland. The results of this research contributed to the European *Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture* (AMASS) project, a Horizon 2020-funded research project. Additionally, the current study was approved by the University of Lapland's research ethics committee.

The main objective was to document the contribution and importance of the lived experiences (Burch, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1961, 2004) of cocreated visual images in the context of VL (Messaris, 1987, 1994). I argue that VL should not be

only operated within one literal subject 'as visual' but that it has vast implications (Little et al., 2015) that are always rich, layered and plural (Johnson, 2008). Various examples make it clear that people interpret visuality in opposing ways. For instance, different people experiencing a book or movie are always going to give diverse results because of their varied emotions and understandings.

Similarly, art can be expressed in a variety of ways, each of which offers a unique experience. One of these ways of expressing ourselves is through language, which is a whole different experience than solely employing the visual arts. Language is always open to interpretation, and through creative processes, we understand art metaphorically as a linguistic communication because we generally *express*, *describe* and *state* our ideas through language (Sullivan, 2006, p. 1). Hence, the current study shows that embodied experiences foster open discussion as a way to discover and share new knowledge, promoting critical thinking through communication (Newfield, 2011).

From an epistemological point of view, two methodological approaches are used for this study. One of these is reflexivity, which refers to examining one's beliefs, judgements and practices during the research process and how these may have influenced the research (Finlay, 1998; Hammond & Wellington, 2020). The second interpretative approach leads to constructivism, which supports how individuals acquire knowledge of the world and how knowledge can be positively constructed based on our experiences (Magoon, 1977; Hall, 1997; Schwandt, 1994; Mills et al., 2006).

The constructivist approach actively helps people to construct or make their own knowledge, and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learners (Elliott et al., 2000, p. 256; McLeod, 2019); here, knowledge is better expanded when

the participants construct it themselves while engaging in an interpretive cocreative process. The method employed in the current study was a thematic analysis of the visual images photographed by the participants, who then went on to write reflective narratives about their experiences. This activity led to the construction of a representation of their own personal experiences and interpretations, which added new knowledge among the group.

Language not only conveys thoughts and feelings, but it also helps construct concepts. It is a product of a society's thinking and behaviour (Guessabi, 2020). Hall (1997) claimed that 'representation connects meaning and language to culture' (p. 15). He further illustrated that in addition to expanding meaning, it also becomes a means of exchanging ideas between the members of a culture made up of language, signs and images. 'Things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs' (Hall, 1997, p. 25). Across cultures, people, understand and communicate differently, therefore; there is no guarantee that every meaning in one culture is also the same as it is in another. Hence, mutual acceptance is only possible through the exchange of multidimensional perspectives and interpretations to expand the conceptual understanding of people from diverse cultures.

Methodology

To achieve the research goal, the central research questions were created, as follows:
1. How can reflexivity help construct youths' personal representations?
2. How can the documentation, interpretation and reflection in the artistic process be relevant for creative and critical thinking?

Documentation Through Photography

The current study is based on an overarching research strategy approach that primarily focused on the documentation of the entire artistic process through photography (Meron, 2019). Here, the use of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) led to focus group discussions and note taking as research methods.

Critical thinking is fundamental and crucial to everyday decision making (Turan et al., 2019). For this reason, the research began from an observational study of form and texture through the lens of camera. As the camera lens was utilised as a filter to limit what could be seen, the expression of seeing changed when compared with the naked eye. Reading and exploring the cocreated visual data helped decipher the varied interpretations of the participants, thus creating a rich visual language that came about through by sharing these abstract images.

Through this artistic reflection process, I identified the reflexivity in the representation and interpretation of commonalities; it proved to be a successful tool for conducting research in the field of interpretivism (Díaz Adrade, 2009) to establish and build collaborative knowledge. The introduction of this method created new knowledge and language for the participants, enabling them to think critically, reflect on each other's perspectives and experience the lived phenomenon. Moreover, taking on the role as a participant in this qualitative study allowed me to experience a role change and uncover the potential for reflective visual interpretation to inform society about meaningful yet hidden life experiences. This artistic experiment also enhanced the youths' understanding of the contribution of VL to meaning making, attitude change, decision making and self-expression.

Study Design

The participants were presented with a brief objective of the study and their possible contribution to the artistic inquiry. They were encouraged to be intuitive and imaginative. For this purpose, they were assigned a preliminary task, as discussed below:

Pretask: Photographic documentation as an expression (Visual Literacy Workshop)

During the pretask phase of the VLW, the participants were asked to photograph a minimum of 10 close-ups of everyday rudimentary objects in a unique and abstract manner, focusing primarily on the lines of the object. Next, they were engaged in a detailed discussion on how these graphical images spoke to them. One of the participants was online and shared the photographs and reflections through a digital platform (Teams). The relevance of lighting, clarity and aesthetic in the photos reflected their own unique representation and perceptions. Everyone came up with stimulating clarifications, hence establishing how each person's perceptions, interpretations and meaning making varied (see Table 1).

The primary role of this activity was twofold. First, the aim was to assess the VL level among the participants: how they framed a simple everyday object using a camera as a tool for documentation and then gave it meaning. The second purpose was to help them see through each other's perspectives and have a dialogue about their results.
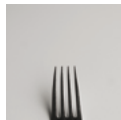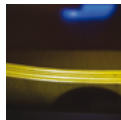
Figure No.	Participant	Photo Image	Participant's original idea	Other participants	Reflection of the other participants
Figure 1	2		*Waves*	2	Bond, tied up
				3	Community
				4	Swaddle
Figure 2	3		*Order*	1	Focused
				3	Hide and seek
				4	Distance
Figure 3	4		*Bend, curve*	2	Focal point, attention
				3	Divided
				4	Space
Figure 4	1		*Tight, breathless*	1	Bleached
				3	Clawed
				4	Ocean floor, serenity

Table 1: Example from each participant's pretask: Photographic documentation as an expression (VLW)

Note taking of focus group discussions

A focus group discussion was initiated with the aim of creating a dialogue between the interpretative and reflective examination of the images. By means of IPA, it was found that each participant had a different point of view about each photographed image. During the discussion session, the participants commented on each other's captured images, sharing their reflections on what they saw based on their immediate interpretations. They wrote down their responses in one word on the provided sticky notes, which was very helpful in the thematic analysis, as discussed later in this chapter. Table 1 shows the variations in the perceptions, interpretations and meaning making

of each participant in their individual words. When asked by the other participants about their views of the same image, they perceived and interpreted it differently and had different opinions about it. This motivated the participants to move on to the next session of the workshop, which was about making a two dimensional artwork.

Participants

The participants (M=0, F=4) were a small group, two of whom were researchers and the other two students. But as the sole author (researcher) of this particular chapter, I do not see the small number of participants as a limitation, but it can also be seen as one of the strengths and a beginning of a meaningful process. As a researcher, I immersed myself as a participant to comprehend the phenomenon closely. By becoming part of the whole process, I was able to see through the youth's viewpoint. All the steps that were taken together during the workshop were cocreated by this close-knit group. The group had in-depth discussions about the cocreated data, in which we all shared our ideas, interpretations and spaces (virtual and physical). Consequently, this intimate process led to the personal mandala-making process, which, in the context of VL, produced promising results.

Results and Discussion

The key findings are discussed and summarised in themes that can also provide recommendations for future research.

Categories of Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis categories helped collect a number of results showing the participants' experiences and how the role of documentation affected the group's interpretation of their experiences.

Association with the photographic images

The participants became aware of the associations that resonated through the photographic images. This allowed the participants to better reflect their personal creativity and express opinions to gain new knowledge about general societal phenomena, including the same ideas that often came up. In this photo (Figure 5), for example, they subconsciously shared the same connotation. According to one participant, 'It reminds me of a bio lab or perhaps sense of demise and re-birth', while another participant added,
'It looks green and dingy and I feel trapped'. The remaining two participants titled this photo as 'lost and tangled' because they found the element of tangling in it. From similar comments on other photo images, the concept of 'associations' emerged within the working group.

Figure 5. Bio lab (Participant 2)

Figure 6. Protection (Participant 3)

Co-creation appreciation

The cocreation experience was valued, even though the participants were in a blended physical and digital environment. This allowed them to participate in a process that demonstrated that staying in a hybrid digital space does not limit artistic expression. The images were being shared on the same digital platform, and the participants discussed the similarities and differences in each other's perspectives. An interesting conversation about this image (Figure 6) took place when three of the participants saw a shelter, but one saw an open crocodile mouth about to bite. This discussion culminated in an additional concept, which was the 'discovery' of one's own imagination because they were the actors of this specific discussion and reflective activity.

Figure 7. Waffle (Participant 2)

Smooth generation gap

All the participants reflected enthusiastically, despite the generation gap between the youth and researchers. To support this process, the researchers stepped out of their research role and took part in the participants' 'art worlds' (Becker, 1982) and experienced their ideas around cocreation. An important perspective on the social art was introduced by Becker, who explained, 'Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art' (p. 34), going on to state, 'Art is social in being created by networks of people acting together, and proposes a framework for the study of

differing modes of collective action, mediated by accepted or newly developed conventions' (p. 369). While translating this image (Figure 7), the participants contributed different meanings. One of the participants commented, 'It reminds me of the surface of the waffle cone and I can even feel the taste of it'. The other participant added, 'It is a kaleidoscopic image that makes me feel nostalgic'. The next participant said, 'To me, this is giving an idea of growth, moving forward or even upwards'. Whereas, the last participant remarked, 'How sturdy and militant looking this is!' This deep, diverse and multilayered thinking led to the concept of provoking 'innovation' within the task that has potential to develop overtime.

Cocreated visual language and culture

The involvement of the participants grew with each image interpretation, as if a Pandora box had opened, letting out lots of complex and exciting ideas. The main value of the current study was to perform it together because the experiences and views of youth and researchers were very similar. This created a common visual language for the group within that specific space and time. The young people's ideas were quite mature and, as already mentioned, I did not experience a large generation gap. One reason could be our common artistic background.

In the further course of discussion about how certain effects are recorded in the photos, the emotional impact was also discussed. It was noticed that certain images shared the same elements, such as line, shape, colour and gradient but differed in meaning. The participants also identified the significant influence of these photos in evoking moods and emotions. This got them talking about different angles, lines, shots, directions and the role of light and how it helped them decode their understanding of each photo image.

Figure 8. Ruffle (Participant 1)   Figure 9. Mould (Participant 1)

In these two photos (Figures 8 and 9), for instance, the discussion began from the perspective of elements of art and principles of design. The participants identified the same form and texture, but their perceptions varied. There were, however, some commonalities, but mostly, it was discussed that there is always the potential to incorporate visual methods of learning and exchange views to develop a 'common' visual and cultural language; this prompted them to grasp both perspectives: 'art and design'. For example, Figure 8 was titled 'Ruffle' by participant 1, whereas participant 2 labelled it as 'Coral and Happiness'. Participant 3 and 4 saw it as a transcript of saga. Similarly, Figure 9 was interpreted as a mould stain by participant 1 but was seen as a new start, birth and gift by participant 2; participant 3 called it a loop, whereas participant 4 described it as comforting and embracing.

Role of reflection and reflexivity

The open discussion gave promising results when reflections on lived experiences were discussed. Reflection is a highly personal expression and can lead to personal transformation through deep thinking (Dewey, 1933); it can

help people make sense of experiences in relation to oneself, others and contextual conditions while reimagining and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefits (Ryan, 2014). Hence, the act of reflection can take place on multiple levels and can serve as a tool to help achieve more abstract or transformative levels of reflection.

Similarly, reflexivity leads to planning, conducting and writing about research and promotes an ongoing, recursive relationship between the subjective responses of researchers and the intersubjective dynamics of the research process itself (Probst, 2015). The role of researchers in reflexivity (Finlay, 1998, 2002a; Pillow, 2003) can pave the way for broader research. During the session, sharing experiences and discussing the value of the reflective approach to research brought the participants closer because they made connections between storytelling and exchanging personal views.

Broader and Future Perspectives

The results discussed above can be adopted for longitudinal research to develop the method into a process that can be used for obtaining a deep understanding and appreciation of note taking and reflection in the enhancement of VL. The participants' reflections indicated that storytelling and discussing creations together can be an advanced and ground-breaking means of learning and exploration. In the reflective cocreation process, themes were identified that can be decisive for the future understanding of the further development of VL, not only for educational purposes, but also for the citizens intellectual growth as it refines their interpretation. These skills include self-awareness, critical thinking, empathy, self-confidence, creative thinking, discovery and belief in one's own creative potential. All of this goes a long way towards strengthening reflexivity.

Limitations

Despite the success demonstrated, COVID-19 was a significant limitation because fewer participants could attend; however, I consider this a minor shortcoming because it allowed the reflective factor of the research to be more detailed. The relationship between the researcher and participants also became closer. However, the lack of participants with no artistic background limited the results of this research and needs to be re-experienced with mixed backgrounds. In addition, the cultural representation from the perspective of VL can be examined more closely with more variations.

Conclusion

In summary, after the completion of this cocreative artistic reflective and interpretive process, I return to the same question as to whether there is such a thing as a tabula rasa. This is a never-ending debate, but in my opinion, I lean towards the idea of a clean slate that can be enriched with all the knowledge acquired over one's lifetime. All this can be accomplished through documentation, which, in addition to providing crucial insights into the relationships between culture, people and events, also reveals how cultural circumstances influence people's visual language (Gill, 2016). As a result of this documentation process, the participants developed their personal expression, thereby increasing their previous knowledge through interaction and discussion. They became aware of the associations that echoed through the photographic images. This enabled the participants to better reflect on their inner creativity and voice their opinions to build new knowledge about common social phenomenon.

A number of positive conclusions were drawn, including the idea that the cocreation experience was valued by the participants, even though they were in a hybrid digital and physical setting. In addition, despite the generation gap between the youth and researcher, all contributed to interpreting the photos, thus creating a common visual language within them. Entering each other's 'art world' changed their thinking significantly and added more value to the artistic cocreations in a social context.

This is consistent with the above-mentioned 'art world' conclusion, which carries over to the documentation role. The value of documentation (Burnaford, 2007) in building knowledge on knowledge was illustrated by the substantial variations found and explored in the current study. I was able to capture the creative process by participating and documenting it as it unfolded. This proved to be the most valuable part of the research because it provided tangible ideas for how to use interpretive and reflective processes to refine creativity. It also confirmed that such introspective creative processes generate powerful emotional experiences, guiding the manner of seeing and thinking, ultimately leading to awareness and a sense of self.

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