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WRITTEN IMAGES: STUDENT-GENERATED DRAWING FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN A TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

Purpose: Research suggests drawing to be a valuable learning strategy. However, most adults claim they “can’t draw.” This article advances ways of navigating this challenge in the context of a transnational UK-China university partnership. **Approach:** An action research, autoethnographic case study into the planning and implementation of accessible drawing strategies featuring observation and reflection on the development and evaluation of an experiential, identity-focused drawing initiative. **Findings:** Overcoming anxieties among “non-artists” confirms drawing to be a popular and effective means of exploring identities, especially when combined with a formative, spoken presentation. **Originality:** Observational findings demonstrate that “drawing to learn” has broad applicability for “problem-posing education” (Freire). The ability to visualise direct personal experiences enhances a sense of selfhood and an

appreciation of the identities of others. The account of this is original in being a research-informed, experience-based enquiry that features student feedback and reflection.

Keywords:

Autoethnography, China, Drawing, Experiential Learning, Teaching, Transnational Education, Visual Culture

1. Introduction

Education can be compared to banking. The teacher is the saver. Students are the bank accounts. Learner accounts get filled up as teaching “experts” deposit their rich knowledge into the minds of “ignorant” students. Paulo Freire criticised this approach in his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). One reason is because the banking concept limits students’ creativity (Freire, 2000, p. 73). This is why Freire preferred “problem-posing education” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). However, knowing what problems to pose at the start is never easy because “it is difficult to *begin* studying” (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 171). One thing we should never do is treat new students simply as empty vessels waiting to be filled. This is the premise of David A. Kolb’s book *Experiential learning*: “Everyone enters every learning situation with more or less articulate ideas about the topic at hand” (Kolb, 2015, p. 39). The first challenge is to identify what these ideas might be. The second is to find a way to express them. This paper suggests a novel sort of problem-posing strategy that effectively captures and conveys students’ prevailing ideas. It can be summed up in a single word: drawing.

2. Methodology

This paper is a “teacher inquiry” into how I teach and how my students learn (Mertler, 2021). As such, it can be understood as an instance of action research, which involves an educator identifying a focus, collecting and analysing information, reflecting on the findings, and coming up with a demonstrable plan of action (Mertler, 2024). This reflexive process is sometimes referred to as “practitioner research” because it bridges theory and practice with the intention of contributing to positive change across both domains (Collins, 2017, pp. 71 & 87).

Foregrounding and illustrating issues of personal and professional concern in ways that are challenging and engaging has much in common with autoethnography, a term that combines

self (auto), culture (ethno) and representation (graphy). Advocates of autoethnography argue that it “creates space for sensemaking that defies logic or sits outside language and sometimes conscious awareness” (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2022, p. 5). This, as we shall see, has particularly relevance to the present study.

The account that follows is based on several years of involvement in transnational education (TNE). In 2018, I began working for a British university at a partner university in Beijing. This Sino-UK joint institute entails me teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students on a number of programmes in such subjects as media, communications, journalism, cultural heritage and museum studies. This paper focuses on a specific component of a four-year Bachelor of Arts dual degree in media communication and advertising. Entitled “Visual Cultures 1,” it is a semester-long introductory module taken after an initial year of English language and study skills support. Its aim is to use images to encourage students to explore the concept of identity, including a sense of self, while retaining an awareness and sensitivity to the identities of those that are “not us.”¹ This sort of reflexive enquiry could provide a useful foundation for a variety of academic majors across a range of disciplines. So, while the specifics are unique, this case study is worth sharing on the grounds that it might inform the practice of other educators in their own teaching. Should that occur, it would confirm the educational case study method to be an effective means of reflecting on specific pedagogical practices, presenting the findings in such a way as to promote further reflection, and encouraging others to do the same (Burch, *et al.*, 2019). Case study research is about analytical exploration and reflection of a given case with the overarching aim of generating “in-depth understanding of a specific topic” (Simons, 2009, p. 21). That topic is...

3. Drawing (To Learn)

“Drawing,” argued Deanna Petherbridge (2010, p. 2), “is the basis of all art and visual thinking.” It is even more fundamental than that if one accepts that it is artistic creativity that distinguishes hominids from other animals (Dewey, 1980, p. 24). Drawing is an innate human act. Today’s educators working with young learners use handprints and stick figures that are remarkably similar to cave art created by our ancestors more than 50,000 years ago (Valentino, *et al.*, 2023; Oktaviana, *et al.*, 2024, p. 5). “A drawing is an autobiographical record of one’s discovery of an event – seen, remembered or imagined” (Berger, 2005, p. 3). Every drawing is at

once an individual interpretation and a translation into a universal language (Berger, 2005, p. 45; Christie, 2017, p. 51; Cicalò, 2020, p. 10).

Drawing has attracted the attention of educational researchers. For example, its utility to experiential education is demonstrated by its efficacy for representing a sense of self, others, and the world (Garista, 2023). Drawings are an effective means of problem solving, information gathering, and the acquisition of domain-specific knowledge (Cicalò, 2020, p. 23; Jee, *et al.*, 2014). There is extensive research into drawing's potential to facilitate student reasoning in science (Scott, 2021; Tytler, *et al.*, 2020). Learner-produced drawings provide non-verbal ways of reflecting and communicating perceptions of life, including when it comes to difficult issues (Molinaro, *et al.*, 2021). This resonates with the earlier comment about how autoethnography allows us to make sense of things beyond logic, language or consciousness (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2022, p. 5).

Given all this, one might expect drawing to be “the incomparable organ of instruction” (Dewey, 1980, p. 347). The main reason why this is *not* the case is because many older children and most adults are reluctant to draw. This is a significant hurdle that needs to be recognized and remembered. The approach advocated here has been deliberately tailored to overcome resistance from those who believe they “can’t draw” (Cohn, 2014; Hirsch, 2010). Even advocates of drawing feel compelled to reclaim it after it had been “stolen” from them in adolescence (Scott, 2021, p. v). This is due to the fact that the majority of older children cease when told they are “no good at drawing” (Anning, 1999, pp. 170-171). An ability to produce a “realistic” representation necessitates “learning to draw,” i.e., training the “isolated skill” of draftsmanship required for someone to render a photographic likeness (Dewey, 1980, p. 93). This differs from “drawing to learn” (Hong, *et al.*, 2021; Masi, 2021), which is more akin to what Dewey regarded as its “real function,” namely “drawing *out*.” Rather than “a means of assisting recognition by means of exact outline and definite shading,” this involves the selective “extraction of what the subject matter has to say” to the drawer according to his or her “integrated experience” (Dewey, 1980, pp. 67, 92 & 95). Dewey (1910, p. 39) posited that drawing has the “power to start and direct significant inquiry and reflection.” Subsequent research into “drawing to learn” confirms that it can also improve visual literacy skills while enhancing engagement, reasoning, and communication (Ainsworth, *et al.*, 2011; Hong, *et al.*, 2021; Karlberg, *et al.*, 2021).

Yet concerns about persistent and widespread resistance to drawing remain (Burch, 2023, pp. 156-157). And one important synthesis of research characterizes drawing as an “adjunct aid” that requires additional and specific support in order to fulfil its promise (Van Meter & Garner, 2005, pp. 320-321). In my teaching, that assistance takes the form of a repeating sequence of a lecture followed by a workshop. The former provides instruction, illustrative examples, and reassurance regarding each “drawing to learn” task. The associated workshop involves students giving five-minute “micro-presentations” in which they discuss their visual creations in front of the whole group. These informal, unassessed “scaffolding” activities are envisaged as “educational ‘stagings’” helping refine ideas and boost confidence (Bulca & Safaei, 2013; Biesta, 2020, pp. 89 & 105; Dannells, *et al.*, 2017, Table 5.1). Central to such a learning process is “the notion of reciprocal exchange, where participants adjust the way in which they understand something in relation to each other” (Renninger & Granott, 2005, p. 111). Reciprocity necessitates a change in mindset when it comes to students’ attitudes to studying. Rather than deriving everything from the “expert,” they are encouraged to look and learn from each other. I, too, learn a lot. Such an inclusive and egalitarian pedagogical stance is relatively unusual, particularly in China (Burch, *et al.*, 2019, pp. 288-289). Yet it is absolutely in line with Freire’s call for pedagogy in which the teacher “is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

4. Written Images

The “drawing to learn” exercises used in my teaching can be summed up as follows:

- ABC me
- 123 me
- Graffiti tag
- Object label
- Mind-map

“ABC me” and “123 me” involve students freely selecting twenty-six words and numbers of personal significance. These tend to refer to all sorts of traits, hobbies, people, animals, food, objects, and activities plus miscellanea such as frequencies, quantities, school grades, addresses, transport routes, and lucky numbers as well as words or figures that might appear in favourite songs or as titles of books and movies. Students are instructed to convert their lexicon of

idiosyncratic words and numbers into two images. Akin to word clouds and infographics, these need careful thought about composition, colour, and style, with the interrelationship and relative importance of each component revealed by the positioning of every element. The resulting images reveal much about the creator's life and personality. These are autoethnographic in that they “draw out” habitual feelings and ideas that may not have been consciously considered.

Students who feel confident about their own creativity readily articulate themselves through expressive handwriting and images, including little drawings and other mark-making. Those less self-assured rely on computer-generated typefaces and clipart. Either response is fine. What matters are the ideas that a student seeks to convey through their visualized words and numbers. The images are a means to an end, namely self-expression. They fall within the broad remit of “drawing.” The authoritative work on this subject argues that seeking a fixed definition would be futile and instead promotes the idea of drawing as a continuum, separate from but in a reciprocal relationship with other arts, pulled in different directions, tasked with varying functions, and put to multiple uses (Petherbridge, 2010, pp. 16 & 18).

As kinds of “written drawings,” the ABC and 123 images lay the foundation for a third activity: graffiti. This is an accessible form of expression with an exceptionally low participation threshold, and which has generated a considerable body of educational literature due to its perceived capacity to spark individual creativity and “make connections to students’ lived experiences and visual culture” (Eldridge, 2013, p. 21; Schorr, 2018). Appreciated within the broader category of street art, graffiti has been shown to promote community building and plurality in public pedagogy (Christen, 2003; Cooper and Sandlin, 2020). This has been demonstrated to be particularly serviceable for students for whom English is not their first language (Rodríguez-Valls, *et al.*, 2012).

To avoid any potential problems, students are restricted to producing graffiti designs on paper or touchscreens instead of on street walls in real-world urban locations. Actual practitioners of this visual practice refer to themselves as “writers” rather than “artists” (Armstrong, 2019, p. 11). One reason is because the baseline for graffiti is the “tag” (Wimsatt, 2008, p. 147). This is akin to a signature, executed quickly, and – in the case of a “one-liner” – the product of a single continuous line. A tag’s purpose is to establish the identity and presence of the writer: “I am here” (Pabón-Colón, 2018, p. 2). Similarly, my students’ colourful graffiti feature inventive use of code

words and numbers in ways that realise the educational goal of using visual culture to declare their presence and explore personal identity while also appreciating the identities of others.

It needs stressing that the ABC, 123, and graffiti exercises have been devised with accessibility in mind to avoid intimidating or inhibiting non-art students. With their self-doubts allayed, it becomes possible to coax them into attempting a more ambitious artistic endeavour: observational drawing (Montgomery-Whicher, 2022). Each student chooses an object in their life that stands out due to its special practical, symbolic or emotional significance. It can be an artefact they possess or one owned by a family member. Alternatively, they may pick a lost object, for example a cherished childhood toy. Drawing it from life encourages close observation. Drawing it from memory brings to life a remembered vision. This capitalises on John Berger's remark cited earlier about how drawings are autobiographical records of events "seen, remembered or imagined" (Berger, 2005, p. 3). I lead the way by showing a sketch I made of my child's first pair of shoes and use it to talk about the emotions and memories this raises in me as I contemplate the life of my now-teenage daughter.

Imbuing inanimate things with meaning is a core tenet of museums and their collections. Students are similarly encouraged to imagine their special object in an exhibition, with their drawing of it illustrating a display label that they are asked to produce. This puts them in the role of the interpreter. Successful interpretation is a form of communication that enables museum visitors to forge "personal connections with things, places, people, and concepts" (Ham, 2013, p. 8). A good exhibition label is in effect an extremely short story (Serrell, 2015, p. 23). Its purpose is to bring inanimate things to life. That is exactly what students do through their cherished object, with the illustrated label prompting close attention and reflection.

The final drawing activity involves giving students a sheet of A3 paper. In the centre of the blank page they are invited to see "home" with their mind's eye. They then chart the environs in whatever way they see fit. The result is an autoethnographical map: a cultural landscape annotated with lived experiences (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). These "mind-maps" conform to an emotional rather than a geographical scale, emphasising items of relevance, bringing distant landmarks close, and sidelining nearby things that lack personal relevance. Consequently, they highlight places, feelings and memories that get missed on conventional maps. Mind-mapping – like all the other tasks – is not evaluated on the grounds of accuracy or according to any aesthetic

criteria. Drawing is instead a means of articulating that rich body of ideas and experiences that every student brings to all learning situations (to recall Kolb).

5. Responses and Reflections

The “ABC me” and “123 me” are a deliberate rebuttal to those who fear that visual culture in education runs the “risk of distracting us from the sphere of words and numbers” (Villa & Zuccoli, 2023, p. v). These student-generated images confirm that we are all capable of producing art with the capacity to make us think, reflect, and express ourselves in ways that “go beyond the... 26 letters of the English language” (Dervin & Tian, 2023, p. 96). Drawing of the kind proposed here has consistently served to reveal all sorts of intimate facets of each student’s life and loves, interests and concerns. For example, I vividly recall finding out about the music of Juice WRLD through one student’s visual ABC and graffiti. That a young female Chinese student should introduce me to a controversial American rapper is a splendid realisation of Freire’s goal of turning students into teachers and teachers into students. When discussing her cultural tastes, this particular learner reflected: “I rarely share such songs with teachers or even friends because many people nowadays have a lot of prejudice against hip-hop culture and rappers, which leads to an impure love for music. Anyway, when we approach every culture with respect, we will be grateful that there is still such love and courage in this world!”

The hidden meanings behind each student’s personal iconography become clear during the micro-presentations that accompanying the images. Drawing brings to the surface internal feelings and associations; those autoethnographic things that, as we have seen, go “beyond logic, language or consciousness” and which stem from the combination of personal and cultural experiences. Clear examples of this occur whenever I engage in dialogue with students after they have shown their drawings. These exchanges often occur via WeChat, a messaging and social media “super app” that is particularly amenable to the construction of communities of learning (Burch & Bunnag, 2023).² This is an effective medium for discussing the images with their creators – as with the Juice WRLD example already mentioned. These interactions realise Freire’s call for students to become “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the[ir] teacher” (Freire, 2000, p. 81).

Such conversations transcend the classroom. For instance, one student reached out to say that, while she was unused to talking about herself, “this drawing course made me decide to try something new. I’m glad my efforts were worth it, and thanks for listening! Having a genuine

listener is the luckiest thing that can happen to a person when it comes to expressing oneself.” A further learner was so inspired that she commissioned a factory to manufacture a doll based on her design. This is all the more remarkable given that drawing initially brought back unhappy childhood memories of being compelled to enrol on a painting course, an experience that was so abortive that it led her to abandon art. This prompted her to add the following afterword to one of her written assignments:

I’m so lucky to have this educational and creative class, which give me powerful affirmation and praise that encourage me to restart painting. I finally realized that painting is not painful for me, but rather memorable. I feel the cleverness of restart, which give me more memories and more inspiration. The gratitude for the course and [the teacher] are both indescribable, but what I can confirm is that this class has allowed me to relive the excitement of my childhood when I first picked up a paintbrush.

While not all participants experienced this sort of epiphany, quantitative data suggests that the majority have derived educational benefit from “drawing to learn.” For instance, entry and exit questionnaires given to one cohort of 40 students made it possible to gauge prevailing attitudes towards drawing and measure changes brought about by the learning experience. When asked, the majority (82%) said they drew as a child but that only 39% continued this practice. On average, students stopped drawing when they reached the age of thirteen. This was due to school pressures combined with a loss of confidence in their drawing ability. More than two-thirds (68%) said that they had never previously been asked to draw in an educational context. In spite of this, half the group felt drawing to be an acceptable learning activity, a figure that rose to 78% after taking the course. On a scale of 1-10, the efficacy of drawing as a way of learning stood at 7.29 before the course, rising slightly to 8.0 afterwards. Self-confidence in drawing rose from 4.68 to 6.19.

From a given corpus of emotive words, students were asked to describe their feelings at the prospect of having to present drawings to others. The results reveal elevated levels of nervousness (26.5%) and embarrassment (20.6%). But looking back on this experience it is noticeable that drawing evoked a more relaxed attitude, and a sense of excitement and pride. Even so, nearly one in five (19.4%) remained apprehensive about showing and discussing their images. Nevertheless, overall attitudes towards drawing became more positive and accepting. Those expressing a liking for drawing rose from 53% at the start to 75% by the end. And 92% said that they intended to continue to draw even after the course had ended.

6. Conclusion

Anxiety about drawing is real. This, however, can be overcome with the right approach and support, making it possible to realise the benefits of “drawing to learn.” Autoethnographic student-generated drawings exist as identity “snapshots” that can be potent sources of experiential reflection (cf. Dervin & Tian, 2023, p. 58). Looking at their images now and in the future involves students journeying “back to what they have ‘done’ and ‘said’ to others” with their various drawings serving “as a way of fluidifying the way they see themselves” (Dervin & Tian, 2023, pp. 13-14). This is very close to Freire’s vision of “problem-solving education” in which “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). This is the antithesis of the banking concept of education. And it is drawing that provides both the mechanism and the medium for ensuring that students’ creativity stays in the centre of the educational frame.

In this case study, the learners are undergraduates at a Chinese university studying media, communications and advertising as part of a transnational education programme. However, Dewey’s point about drawing’s “power to start and direct significant inquiry and reflection” means that the strategies described can be adapted to suit a range of learning situations. Furthermore, coupling drawings to micro-presentations facilitates scaling up the number of participants. To date, the largest group has numbered 40, with the presentations spread across four-hour sessions. Of course, the “banking” lectures preceding each workshop might be delivered to very many people, especially if they should be held online (Burch, 2023). Passive lecture-goers could be transformed into active learners by being split into multiple smaller groups to talk about their “written images.” Every instance of showing and sharing is an affirmation of “a profound trust in people and their creative power” (Freire, 2000, p. 75). As such, all educators are encouraged to consider the potential of “drawing to learn” to enrich their practice and engage their students.

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Notes

¹ This information is taken from the syllabus document validated by both universities.

² Students' anonymized comments appear with their permission. Screenshots of the name-redacted WeChat messages can be supplied upon request.

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