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Understanding corruption through freehand drawings: a case study of undergraduate business students' visual learning in the classroom.

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Understanding corruption through freehand drawings: a case study of undergraduate business students' visual learning in the classroom.

Abstract

Interest in the role of visual literacy within education has grown significantly over the last 50 years. Many scholars maintain that living in an image-rich culture in the twenty first century requires preparing visually literate graduates who are capable of a critical reading and understanding of visual texts, as well as constructing images through critical thinking. However, nowadays, discussion about visual learning and development of visual literacy competencies of students studying business and management remains quite limited. This paper presents a case study of a visual learning activity introduced to 1st year undergraduate students which are often referred to as 'digital natives'. This activity aims to develop students' visual critical thinking about a complex social phenomenon of corruption through their engagement with a non-digital activity such as freehand drawing.

Keywords: freehand drawing, pedagogy, visual learning, visual critical thinking

Introduction

Nowadays, the growing number of academics and practitioners are calling for active, engaging and collaborative learning techniques which should contribute to the development of visually literate graduates in various disciplines (e.g. Beaudoin, 2016; Holland, 2014; Schönborn & Anderson, 2006). Although, Sweeney & Hughes (2017, p.68) argue that 'business students require a high level of visual competence to be adequately prepared for the highly visual nature of business communication in the 21st century', to date very little pedagogical attention has been given to the development of visual literacy of business and management students. As professionals who teach international business and principles of responsible management, we would like to respond to this call by introducing and discussing

our teaching initiative of creating a learning space which encourages the use of visual activities such as freehand drawing. We use the practice of freehand drawing in our classroom as a vehicle for business students' learning about complex issues related to global social responsibility and responsible leadership. For us, visual literacy is important for developing students' critical thinking by enabling them to record their thought processes and to construct meaning through engagement with visual materials that they produced during classroom activities (Avgerinou, 2001). Therefore, we define visual literacy not only as the ability to interpret images but also as the ability *to generate* images in order to externalise what is in the mind and to communicate ideas and concepts more effectively.

Freehand drawings

Inevitably in the digital age, new technologies have dramatically changed teaching and learning approaches. The growing body of literature underscores the adjustments to pedagogical practices that universities and educators have made in an effort to align content and methods with the language of so-called 'digital natives' (Kennedy et al., 2008; Faridi et al., 2017; Prensky, 2001; Waycott et al., 2010). Such adjustments have contributed to a gradual move to new methods of learning and teaching characterised by extensive use of technology and digital tools such as blended lectures, online quizzes and interactive simulations, just to mention a few. To counter the dominance of technology-based teaching approaches, we introduced a freehand drawing activity in the classroom to support students' learning about a complex social phenomenon.

Freehand drawing is widely recognised as an effective and efficient way of recording and communicating a flow of ideas (Richards, 2013). It is also seen as an effective 'visual elicitation technique' which allows students to explore multiple ways of understanding and challenging 'taken-for-granted' assumptions (Donnelly and Hogan, 2013; Feeney et al,

2015). The pedagogical benefits of a freehand drawing activity include enabling students to draw their own interpretations of a particular phenomenon as well as facilitating students' knowledge construction and visual critical thinking (Feeney & Hogan, 2017). In classroom freehand drawing activities students build their own knowledge by creating, discussing and presenting their own visual messages rather than relying on an external source to support their discussion. Despite their widely discussed benefits, freehand drawing activities are notable by their absence in the author's own area of practice: the business studies classroom.

Learning outcomes

The visual learning activity discussed in this paper is a seminar activity from a module called 'Global Business Environment'. The purpose of the module is to provide undergraduate students with a foundation and understanding of responsible business and sustainable development. The module is mandatory for 1st year undergraduate programmes in Business and Management at Northumbria University, UK. The number of students studying this module each year is around 800. The structure of the module comprises one two-hour seminar and one one-hour lecture per week. There are around 20 students in every seminar group. The seminar programme is designed around the United Nations sustainable development goals. From a formal assessment perspective, the module learning requirements are met with the submission of a portfolio of essays related to various topics related to globalisation and sustainable development covered in the module. The learning objectives of the module are focussed on building an understanding of global challenges and issues that cross borders of background, culture and nationality. The visual learning activity has been introduced in the seminars to develop students' critical thinking about a complex social phenomenon such as corruption through their engagement with freehand drawing. The learning outcomes of the freehand drawing activity are informed by ACRL visual literacy

competency standards for higher education (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011). They are as follows:

- To develop students' visual literacy competencies which enable them to participate in classroom (and wider) discussions using images and to inform their interpretation and analysis of these images through discourse with others.
- To enhance the student ability to integrate images into academic work to effectively clarify and solve problems in their subject specific learning.
- To advance students presentation skills using freehand drawings to present and defend their arguments to an audience.

Activity description

Before coming to the seminar, students were asked to research and read about corruption in their chosen country. During the seminar the students were asked to utilise this research to discuss the sources, causes, and consequences of corruption in the world, while establishing some recommendations of how corruption could be addressed globally. The visual learning activity was introduced as a 20-minute activity at the start of the seminar to explore students' level of comprehension of the phenomenon and provide some formative feedback to students. For the freehand drawing activity, students were asked to discuss the magnitude of corruption by drawing and presenting several examples of how \$1 trillion (US Dollars) could be presented in more understandable terms. \$1 trillion (US Dollars) has been chosen as a baseline, because it is believed that this figure represents bribes paid annually on a global scale (IMF, 2016).

The students were split into small groups of four to five members randomly and were provided with A0 flipchart paper and a selection of coloured markers for the freehand drawing activity. Students had no prescriptions as to what and how they should draw. Some

of the students expressed concerns that they could not draw, or their drawings were really bad, but seminar tutors reassured them that quality of drawings would not be judged and knowledge of any drawing techniques was irrelevant. This put students' concerns at rest and they actively participated in group work.

During a freehand drawing activity each group drew, on average, 4-5 different images to represent their understanding of the magnitude of corruption. Examples of students' freehand drawings are provided in Figure 1 and Figure 2. These learner-generated images were used in the classroom plenary discussion to develop a collective interpretation of the costs of corruption to the global economy. Despite initial concerns of some students regarding their ability to draw, producing freehand drawings proved to be a very engaging learning experience. As a result, all learning outcomes which were initially set up for this learning activity have been met.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Data analysis and discussion

Freehand drawings produced by thirty groups of 1st year undergraduate students (2017-18 academic year) were collected and analysed by researches after the seminar activities. A total of one hundred and thirty individual drawings were produced. To analyse these drawings, and expose our students' understanding of the phenomena in question, we used thematic visual analysis (Drew & Guillemin, 2014) - an increasingly accepted data analysis technique used to assess visual data (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As most drawings are capable of several interpretations (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011), we categorised and coded the manifest content in three iterative cycles. Each cycle consisted of the following steps:

- Step 1: Systematically review each drawing and assign a representative keyword, or, when several interpretations are possible, a range of keywords;
- Step 2: Compare and contrast assigned keywords to identify patterns in the dataset, while using these emergent patterns to collate drawings into groups;
- Step 3: Review each group to ensure that each drawing is consistent with the collective pattern;
- Step 4: Assign themes to each group to capture the breadth of drawings.

The coding procedure was conducted by one member of the research team and has been agreed upon by the team. The process of categorising and coding these drawings led to two higher order themes (HoT), i.e. *consumption-orientated* and *social purposes*, which represent fourteen lower order themes (LoT). These themes are presented in Table 1.

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

From Table 1, we can note that consumption-orientated themes accounted for the larger proportion of freehand drawings, with 83% of drawings (108 out of 130) in the dataset belonging to this HoT. The most cited LoT is ‘food and drink’ for personal consumption. Students drew images that included: the number of chicken nuggets that could be bought from McDonald’s, the number of standard pints that could be purchased from the JD Weatherspoon public house chain, and the quantity of Cadbury’s Freddo Bars that equate to USD \$1 trillion. Figure 3 depicts the range of drawings that were included in this LoT.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Other significant LoTs include material possessions (22 drawings; 17%) and private property (18 drawings; 14%). The images of private property drawn by students included the number of average houses that could be bought in London, UK, the quantity of Burj Khalifa’s

that could be built, and the amount of Buckingham Palaces that could be purchased. An example of these drawings is presented in Figure 4.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

In relation to the second HoT, i.e. *social purposes*, students drew 22 images (17% of overall drawings). The most common LoT image was related to ‘free education’, whether that be funding free university places or eradicating education inequalities. Student groups also considered financial equality across the global population and within the United Kingdom context. Examples of students’ freehand drawing illustrating the *social purposes* theme (e.g. eradication of poverty and free education) are presented in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

Overall, we observed the widespread prevalence of the ‘consumption mindset’ that manifested itself in the results of the students’ classroom work when they tried to make sense of the implications of corruption and its USD \$1 trillion cost. This finding mirrors other studies (e.g. Borin & Metcalf, 2010) that have explored knowledge retention and student mindsets when teaching sustainability to business students. In the same vein, our findings also resonate with Giroux’s (2009, p.110) observations that “the classroom is no longer a safe space immune from the corporate and ideological battles”. As a result of freehand drawing activity analysis, we were able to discover that students’ world view remains largely individualistic and consumption orientated. We also were able to reflect on the inherent challenges associated with obstacles for implementing responsible management practices created by this mindset. However, growing number of business students are gradually becoming more oriented towards a pro-social direction. This was evident with number of LoT images (n=22) related to social purposes and the UN sustainable development goals.

Possibilities and Limitations

Freehand drawing activity discussed in this paper opens the door for further adoption of innovative art-based teaching practices in business schools' curricula. As we have demonstrated, freehand drawing activity can provide insights into students' level of comprehension of a complex social phenomenon. This can be used by educators to tailor subsequent lecture and seminar materials. For example, our observations of students' individualistic, consumption-orientated mindset have been used to develop succeeding seminars and lectures to foster a socially-orientated mindset by equipping students with more sophisticated understanding of responsible business practices. Obviously, more work is needed to understand and tackle the transactional and economically driven mindsets prevalent in business and management students in the future.

Although our paper presents results for a relatively small sample of business students and may not fully capture the learning of full cohort, our findings resonate with studies exploring benefits of freehand drawing as a teaching activity in other disciplines. For instance, Feeney and Hogan (2017) used a freehand drawing activity to explore the understanding of 'civic engagement' of students from three degree programmes comprising three disciplines: business, science, and engineering. Similarly, Feeney et al (2015) used drawings of students studying political science to generate classroom discussion about Irish politics.

Conclusion

The growing number of academics and teaching professionals argue that contemporary business schools' curricula require pedagogical practices which contribute to the development of visual literacy competencies necessary for critical, self-reflective and knowledgeable graduates. We contribute to this body of literature suggesting that freehand

drawing activities can add value to the undergraduate business students' skills sets by helping them to conceive, select, develop and explain their ideas. In presenting results of our teaching initiative, we hope to encourage use of freehand drawing within business schools' curricula and beyond. We observed the considerable potential of learner-generated freehand drawings in producing more sophisticated discussions about complex social phenomena and challenging 'taken-for-granted' assumptions. We argue that academics can explore a range of innovative freehand art-based teaching practices in addition to technology-based approaches which are currently widely utilised to accommodate the learning needs of 'digital natives'. We recognise that a lot work needs to be done in terms of developing and incorporating visual learning activities within the business curriculum to develop students' visual sensibilities through the practice of drawing. Moreover, more work should be done in the future to support teaching staff in acquiring some basic understanding of the importance of using learner-generated images in their teaching practices and developing their expertise in teaching visual literacy competencies by freehand drawing.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of their article.

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