7 Researcher Reflections: Using Visual Methods to Enhance Our Understanding of Employability

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature recognizing the importance of visual methods such as photo/drawing elicitation in social science research and in education. Non-textual data provides rich experiences from participants and can be used alongside traditional methods, such as interviews for rich data collection and analysis. While drawings/comic storyboards have been explored with school children, less research exists on using visual methods for student employability, a topic that has received increasing attention in higher education. Research suggests that employability is one of the key drivers for international students' mobility. However, when it comes to unfolding student employability journeys, current research tends to rely on traditional methods such as interviews and questionnaires. There remains a lack of innovative approaches to advance research in the field of international student employability. In this reflection chapter we explore how traditional and digital drawings can be used as innovative methods to enrich understanding of student employability. Using data from two recent studies conducted by the authors and our subsequent reflections, this chapter showcases this participatory approach, presenting the benefits and challenges of application for international student employability research.

Keywords: drawing, digital drawing, international student employability, visual methods

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education in the UK has become increasingly internationalized. This has particularly manifested in international student recruitment (Li et al. 2021; Zhao and Kung, 2021). According to HESA (2020), international students account for one-fifth of the student population in higher education institutions, making invaluable social, cultural, and economic contributions to both the host universities and the local regions (Russell group, 2017). Despite the steady increase in their recruitment, international students continue to face challenges such as language and cultural barriers during their studies abroad (Zhao and

Brown, 2017). Research suggests that these barriers not only impact student academic performance (Mesidor and Sly, 2016; Zhao and Reilly, 2021) but also impact their career prospects (Huang and Turner, 2018).

Research indicates that enhancing employability is one of the main reasons students pursue education abroad (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Matherly and Tillman, 2019). In contrast to home students, international students face more difficulties when seeking employment after graduation both in the country where they are studying and in their home country. Among the key barriers to employment for international students in host countries are visa restrictions, the lack of internships within programs, unfamiliarity with local work cultures, and a lack of local networks (Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020). In addition, a lack of knowledge about overseas markets and UK-centric career support services in UK universities further disadvantage international graduates who intend to return to their home countries for employment (Li et al., 2021; Goodwin and Mbah, 2019).

A growing body of research has since focused on the employability of international students by exploring the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as employers, university staff and international students (Saunders and Zuzel, 2010; Succi and Canovi, 2020; Zhao and Cox, 2021). However, these studies mainly focus on examining students' individual employability skills enhancement within the study abroad programs through surveys and interviews. There remains a lack of understanding of student employability journeys, such as managing their employability development and transition to the workplace (Jones, 2013; Huang, 2013). This could arguably be due to a lack of innovative methods for exploring the topic of concern since much of the literature tends to focus on traditional methods. The field of education to employment transitions research remains dominated by hypothesis-testing with a lack of detailed exploration of the complex processes going on for the individual (Brzinsky-Fay, 2014). Methodological approaches have been dominated by quantitative and large-scale longitudinal studies, often dehumanizing and disconnecting the 'human' or relational experiences of education to work transitions and associated employability issues as a result (Parry, 2020). Timming (2017) proposes that employability research could utilize auditory or visual methods to better understand the experience of students. In this reflective chapter, we propose visual methods as a way to advance research in the field of international student employability by reflecting on our own experiences as researchers utilizing these methods. We showcase the potential of applying hand drawings or digital comics to collect storytelling narratives to explore students' experiences on their transition from work to employment. We then reflect on the benefits and limitations of these methods for future research.

Visual Methods

Visual methods in social science research are often defined as the use of visual materials for research and include all the types of data, whether pre-existing or created by researchers or respondents (Pain, 2012). Utilizing visual methods is a proven way of generating greater amounts and richness of talk when working with young adults (Bagnoli, 2009; McGrath, Mullarkey and Reavey, 2020). It is often viewed as a participatory method (Sweetman, 2009) although the level of participation can vary according to the ways that visual methods are used. The duality of visual participative methods as being both a process and product, where participants' reactions are integral is recognized by many using visual methods (Clarke and Holt, 2019; Guillemin, 2004; McGrath et al., 2020; Reavey, 2011). Drawing as one of the most common visual methods is increasingly used in a wide range of disciplines, such as education, psychology, and health care (Mitchell et al, 2011; Rees, 2018; Watson and Barton, 2020). Drawings can make important contributions to end products of knowledge and the processes of knowledge construction around a topic. It can generate rich data for researching topics or issues that are 'complex, multifaceted, emotive, and dynamic' (Mazzetti and Blenkinsopp, 2012, p.651), such as research into the career possibilities of international students. For these reasons, it lends itself to employability research with obvious benefits when working with international students who may be facing language barriers that may otherwise limit traditional research interviews where the researcher and participants do not speak the same language.

Hand Drawings as a Research Technique

As children, we draw freely, usually without apparent negative evaluation or self-criticism. This openness to drawing our feelings and our worlds seems to disappear as we become increasingly self-conscious in our teenage years and beyond (Garner, 2008). The production of drawings is often seen as a pre-cursor to others' judgment. It is perhaps no surprise therefore, that being asked to draw in research contexts appears to commonly trigger negative reactions and resistance from participants, at least initially (Clarke and Holt, 2017). When the idea of drawing was introduced in the first author's doctoral research with 17- and 18-year-old young adults about to make the transition from school to work (Parry, 2020), nervous laughter was common, including from the researcher. However, the value of using drawing in research outweighs any initial procedural discomforts. As Guillemin (2004) and McGrath et al. (2020) point out, drawings can support participants to talk about a topic or a phenomenon (via the process of production), as well as a way of looking overall at a topic (via the final product itself).

In the first author's research looking at the occupational possible selves (OPS) of young people prior to making the school to work transition (STWT) (Parry, 2020), the aim was to explore, understand and interpret participant-generated drawings together with participants in real-time during a semi-structured interview. Participants were constrained in their drawings with a structured request for them to draw pictures of a hoped-for OPS and feared-for OPS. It may ultimately have been more daunting for participants if no structure had been imposed on their drawings (Bagnoli, 2009). This structure had benefits in that it enabled comparison of drawings between participants more easily than if instructions regarding drawings had been totally free from constraints, a nomothetic approach proposed by Meyer (1991).

Digital Drawings as a Research Technique

Despite the fact that hand drawing allows research participants to interact with their creative selves as well as elicit emotion and expression of experiences (Copeland and Agosto, 2012; Kearney and Hyle, 2004), there are also some challenges. For example, it relies to some extent on drawing skills. As a result, participants may be embarrassed by the quality of their drawings or may consume additional time during the data collection phase.

In a recent research project, the second author used digital comic generator tools such as StoryboardThat to counter this problem. The participants were instructed to create online storyboard/comic strips using a drag-and-drop function of an online digital comic strip creator, utilizing various scenes, characters, speech bubbles, and textables. No prior drawing skills are required. The tool allows participants to quickly generate rich data, such as cartoon stories about their experiences. It does, however, require participants to have access to digital equipment, such as a laptop or tablet, and extra time for them to become familiar with the software.

In another project conducted by the second author, digital drawing was combined with semi-structured focus groups (Zhao et al., 2021). Instead of asking participants to use the digital storyboard software, we created templates with different characters (single, peers, groups) with blank speech bubbles for them to fill in. There is also a story narration section for participants to set the scenes and add additional notes. Participants also have an option to draw if they prefer. However, most participants chose to create their stories using direct templates. Participants were then asked to explain their cartoons with the rest of the group before semi-structured interview questions were asked. To our surprise, participants were much more reflective and able to better relate to each other's comments in the focus group interviews. The

structured templates afford quantitative analysis of visual data through the coding of emotions and themes. The contents of the digital story-boards provide qualitative insights into participants' experience without missing any critical incidents (Barton and Ryan, 2020; Stitt-Gohdes et al., 2000). However, there are still limitations using digital drawing compared to hand drawing. Participants are restricted to pre-existing drawing elements or icons and often need digital equipment, which may incur extra research costs.

Combining Visual Methods with Other Analytical Approaches

Creative methods, such as drawing, combine well with discursive approaches and enable for deeper and richer discourse to be produced (and subsequently interpreted) through the research (Wiggins, 2017; Wiggins and Potter, 2008). In addition, drawings can offer insights to participants themselves, being a useful reflection activity to think about and subsequently visualize and verbalize their experiences, hopes and fears to themselves and others e.g., about their future in work.

Using drawings as a tool to help participants imagine and subsequently verbalize their future possible selves in work brings a novel offering to employability research (Parry, 2020) and offers great potential for employability studies with international students. The researcher can interpret images produced by participants as standalone sources, but can also be combined with other forms of analysis such as discourse analysis. In this way, the verbal discourse generated alongside the pictures, as individuals talk through their drawings, is essential and forms part of the 'data'. Indeed, many researchers utilizing visual methods do not see drawings as containing inherent meanings by themselves (Clarke and Holt, 2019; Kearney and Hyle, 2004) and argue they could be over-interpreted by researchers without participant discussion (Honkanen, Poikolainen and Karlsson, 2018).

Practical Guide with Examples

Many researchers using visual methods report negative comments or anxieties about producing drawings experienced by participants (Clarke and Holt 2019; Guillemin 2004; Literat, 2013). Reassuring participants that their drawings will not be judged in terms of quality is therefore an essential part of introducing this form of visual method.

In the first author's research (Parry, 2020), young people's initial reactions to drawing pictures included laughter, worry, negative judgements and critical attitudes about their drawing skills and abilities. These reactions were fairly short in duration and once the task was started, participants appeared to put initial negative reactions aside and enjoy the task. These reactions were only seen the first time the young people encountered

the request to draw in the research interview, suggesting that creative or less conventional methods may require greater initial upfront work on the part of the researcher to encourage and support participation, but that once participants are reassured of no judgment, these processes do not need to be repeated. After introducing the concept of OPS, participants were provided with blank paper and a range of colored pens and asked to draw pictures representing their future hoped-for and feared-for occupational possible selves (OPS). Participants were informed that they could add words to their images if they wanted and to draw the picture in whatever way they felt most comfortable with. The process of 'doing' drawings within the interview and subsequently having them in front of us whilst we chatted, appeared to serve several functions for participants: it introduced a sense of lightness and fun; increased the conversational flow; provided a useful structure to the interview process; and enabled young people to raise and talk about difficult and potentially sensitive issues around the transition from school to work, that they may otherwise not have discussed using words alone.

Figure 1 shows a collage generated with elements from all participants' hoped-for occupational possible selves (OPS) (Chalk et al., 2005). These elements were chosen because they contained representations of dominant discourses impacting on the way young people drew pictures of and talked about future OPS in our conversations. Individuals drew

Figure 1 Collage of Elements from young people's Hoped-For Occupational Possible Selves
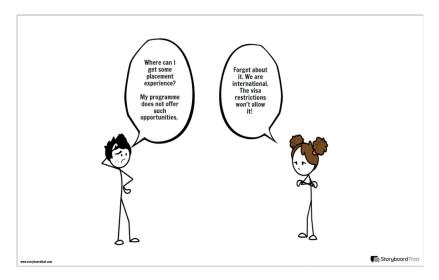
pictures of tasks they hoped they would undertake in future jobs, in addition to adjunct benefits to be gained from being in their hoped-for career. After we discussed their own interpretations of their hoped-for OPS drawing, participants were asked 'what do you think family/teachers/friends would say if they saw this drawing?' This enabled reflection and talk around others in the young people's lives whose norms and expectations may have influenced participants' expected future careers, for example.

Although participants may be less anxious about producing hand drawings when using digital tools, researchers must provide participants with instructions to enable them to become familiar with these tools. It is also crucial that researchers select digital software that is user-friendly. The extra inconvenience of creating an account and negotiating the functionalities usually means that a research team may lose participants. Also, it is important to consider the digital divide since some participants may require digital equipment to complete the task. Computer labs can be booked for participants who wish to use the research facilities instead of their own equipment, but this will increase the cost of the research.

Figure 2 shows a digital storyboard created by an international student from a project conducted by the second author. The digital software (StoryboardThat) provides users with various character speech bubbles. This participant, who was an international student, used stick characters to create a dialogue between him and his classmate. Once again, within the selected stick characters, there are a variety of poses and emotions to choose from. As shown in Figure 1, the participant selected negative emotions to demonstrate that he and his classmates share the same

Figure 2 A digital storyboard created by an international student

emotions regarding the lack of job placement opportunities and the impact of visa registrations, which they consider to be barriers to their employment prospects. There is evidence that visa registrations may have an impact on international students' employability (Goodwin and Mbah, 2019; Jackson, 2017), but it is often difficult to determine how students react to such barriers. The coding of drawings according to themes and emotion types allows for easy identification of the areas for improvement for student employability that most students are concerned about.

Reflections and Recommendations

Using non-traditional research methods requires reflection on how ethics are relationally and continually negotiated in any research encounter (Clark, 2013). For example, how much encouragement do we give participants to use a method that may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable to them before this becomes coercion? Some participants may be more open to 'having a go' at drawing and have a more open stance in general to the research interview as an active process, whereas others may be more defensive in their resistance to producing drawings as part of a research interview (Parry, 2020).

The process of creating hand or digital drawings and discussing the different elements contained within them, enabled greater depth of discussion than may have been possible with interview questions alone. For some of the quieter participants, the drawings helped to provide a structure to conversations and appeared to bring greater confidence for individuals to actively participate, something viewed as beneficial when researching with young people (Bagnoli, 2009). All participants appeared to engage more reflexively with the topic than if they had been providing answers to more standardized interview questions. The subsequent 'text' generated in conversations, as a result of creating the drawings, facilitated rich and deep interpretation. Drawings also appeared to re-calibrate the power difference between the researcher and participants and provided a useful feeling of 'distance' from any uncomfortable feelings brought about by discussing emotive topics such as the transition from education to work. On a pragmatic note, using visual methods helps researchers to remember research encounters more vividly than would be possible purely through written transcripts alone. Using visual methods therefore offers practical benefits for both participants and researchers (in terms of rich information to interpret, as well as facilitating the process of recollecting rich encounters). In the context of benefits to international student employability, career support interventions could be set up which encourage international students to draw, reflect and talk through their transition

experiences, hopes, or expectations around the education to work transition or around assumptions such as what careers and jobs are deemed more for graduates from one country or culture than another.

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