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Williamson, Sarah

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Witness / Eyewitness: Exploring the transformative potential of photography to develop an inclusive view of the world and society

Sarah Williamson

University of Huddersfield, England

Introduction

This paper describes a small-scale qualitative research study exploring the use of the arts, particularly photography, and its potential to develop greater awareness of the world and current affairs in adults preparing to work as educators in the lifelong learning sector. The research is part of a wider study into the use of the arts in professional education, and the extent to which they can have a transformative impact. This particular project using photography has been part of an initiative to develop reflective and critical thinking about the world and society, and a commitment to the values of inclusion, equality and diversity.

Background and context

The potential for professional learning through the arts has not been fully realised and 'remains in the margins' according to McIntosh (2012:4), and to work in this area and conduct research is a contribution which extends the field. Inspired by Greene (1995:2), the aim has been for learners to become, in her words, 'conscious of diversity of background and perspective and to attend to and express regard for difference as well as for what is conceived to be common'.

This research project has been carried out over two academic years with adult learners undertaking a one year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Lifelong Learning at a university in the North of England. The 40 learners in the study, (20 each year) have comprised creative arts professionals aged between 25 and 50 from a range of backgrounds with a wide variety of experience prior to undertaking the PGCE. The trainee lecturers and teachers have included artists, designers, photographers and musicians. The wider research has included the design and implementation of a range of arts-based approaches and curriculum interventions, with a research strategy alongside to investigate value, impact and effect.

'Look again, because...' : the 'Eyewitness' photography project

In this project, as part of a weekly structured activity, 20 PGCE students have been asked to look at and consider poster-sized photographs of a global event, published daily by *The Guardian* newspaper and entitled 'Eyewitness'. The photographs are high quality photo-journalism often by world-class and leading photographers with subjects including news, politics, war, religious events, festivals, culture and images from the natural world. In one week the daily photograph may range from a 'hard news' image one day to an arts subject the next. According to Roger Tooth, head of photography at *The Guardian*, they are 'slice of life images documenting the daily lives of people from around the world', with 'a tremendous feeling of being there, being an eyewitness' (2014).

The five photographs from the previous week's newspaper have been displayed around a classroom as if in an art gallery every Monday morning. Learners have been asked to select a photograph from their seats and then stand beside it. This has been without looking at the photographs in close proximity and without reading caption information. When learners have made their choice, they have been asked to discuss with others also standing there what has influenced their selection. The room has buzzed with conversation. Some learners by each photograph have then been asked to share with the whole class the reason for their choice. The next task has been for everyone to 'carousel' around the room as if viewing pictures in a gallery. This time, learners have looked closely at each photograph. They have been asked again to select one photograph to stand by. This generates considerable interest as very often a learner has selected a different photograph; those standing by a photograph can have changed completely. Learners have again shared and discussed. Have their choices been made for similar reasons or not? If they have changed their mind, why? Once again, some learners have been selected to share their choices and reasons in front of the whole class. After this, a review of the whole activity has been held with whole class dialogue and discussion, to 'deepen and make more complex the conversation' (Eisner 2008:10). At all stages in the exercise it has been clearly evident that learners have been very engaged, eager to share, discuss and listen.

The activity has developed into a regular routine, done before the rest of the day's teaching and learning begins. The exercises have developed and evolved to include variations and provocations with questions about 'gaze', presence and absence, what choices reveal and what might happen next. John Berger has inspired sentences to complete next to a photograph, such as 'look again, because...'

'Art can make a difference' : some relevant literature

According to the author Jeanette Winterson, 'art can make a difference because it pulls people up short' (1997:160). Seminal writers and advocates of the arts in education such as Eisner (2004, 2008) and Greene (1995, 2001) have highlighted the value and the potential for transformation when knowledge is constructed through the arts and aesthetic experience. For Eisner, the arts can 'awaken us from our stock responses' (1995:2), and for Greene, they can be connected to 'becoming wide-awake to the world' (1995:3). In Greene's view, the arts can reveal cultural diversity and a place outside the reach of someone's personal experience, providing 'new perspectives on the lived world' and possibly 'the terms of life' (1995:5). In her well-known words, they can 'release the imagination', and offer new lenses through which new perspectives and new connections might be made, and encounters with the world might 'become newly informed' (1995:18). The arts can enable deeper awareness of oneself, one another and the world (McIntosh 2012:4, Clover et al 2013), and according to Desyllas and Sinclair (2014:298) 'effectively enhance the understanding of the human condition and experience'. They can 'enable us to see more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed' (Greene 1995:123). The arts have the capacity, wrote Dewey (1934:46), to 'touch the deeper levels of life'.

According to Jarvis and Gouthro (2015), the arts can be a rich resource in the professional education and training of adults. They suggest the arts can develop the ability to be creative, critical and reflective, and the capacity to work with change and uncertainty. Arts-informed approaches in professional (health) education have been analysed by Kinsella and Bidinosti (2015:1), who report learners becoming more aware of values, experiencing

deepening self-awareness and reflection, heightened consciousness and the development of capacities to imagine future practices. In the field of teacher education, Kenny et al (2015) refer to the value of reflective arts experiences to shape emerging teacher identities.

With regard to photography, Berger (2013:67) suggests that it can be, amongst other things, 'a way of explaining the world', with Collier and Collier (1986:99), suggesting that photographs can 'function as starting and reference points for discussions of the familiar or the unknown'. Berger (1988/2005:38) has also written of the potential of photography to 'let the visible connect'. Sontag with another point of view has interestingly cautioned that photographic images can eclipse other forms of understanding and remembering, and this can be a problem not because people remember through photographs 'but that they remember only the photographs' (2002:94).

'Act differently' : the arts and transformative learning

Winterson's view that 'art asks us to think differently, see differently, hear differently, and ultimately to act differently' (2006:3) suggests the power of the arts to transform. However, transformative learning is a phenomena of complexity, and transformative learning theory, originally formulated by Mezirow in 1978, is a theory with many diverse perspectives according to Hoggan (2016:16).

Arts-based practices have been acknowledged for their importance in the role of stimulating, fostering and supporting transformative learning (Hoggan and Cranton 2012). For example, in their discussion of intentional interventions to foster transformative learning in higher education, Kasworm and Bowles (2012:394) include five domains one of which is the purposeful use of the arts, literature, film and drama. In an exploration of how the arts can promote transformative learning in adult education contexts, Lawrence (2012) states that art which is evocative or provocative has the potential to facilitate transformation, and that this may be through the creation of art or the witnessing of art created by others. In contemporary times, argues McGregor (2012:310), arts-informed learning is an 'essential tool' in the education of leaders through which to enable deeper, more reflexive and transformational learning. Writing about the arts, Greene (2008:19) simply states: 'they transform'.

Transformative learning theory explores the kinds of changes that result from processes of examining, questioning and revising perception. Things previously unconsidered or unexamined are questioned and looked at in a new way through critical dialogue and critical reflection and this may lead to transformation. McGregor (2012:321) refers to critical, deep reflection as the cornerstone of transformative learning theory. Although Mezirow originally linked transformative learning to 'disorienting dilemmas' and perspective changes through disrupting or shattering experiences, it has also been argued that transformative learning may be gradual, incremental and cumulative (Mezirow 1997, Cranton and Taylor 2012).

'Never a single approach to something remembered' : methodology

This qualitative research has been within an interpretive paradigm which places emphasis and value on human interpretation of the social world (Ritchie et al 2014:11). I have been in the dual role of teacher and researcher and the tensions and implications around positionality are of course acknowledged as important, although not the focus of this paper. Taking the view of Berger (1978/2013:60) that there is 'never a single approach to something remembered', data to find out the impact of engaging with the weekly photography exercise has been collected through various methods and included informal

conversations, class discussion, a 'graffitti wall', learner reflections and semi-structured interviews with individuals. A journal has been kept with observations quickly captured, an 'active record' (Dyer 2013:xii). A general thematic approach has been followed when analysing data (Ritchie et al, 2014).

'It feels like I'm a real person now' : findings and discussion

Looking at the world each week through the 'Eyewitness' photography has had an impact on the learners in the study which other news media has failed to do. For example, it has been regarded as 'a very powerful and instant method to convey a story', and 'a far more interesting way to find out about the news...I find so many articles bombard with words'.

A greater awareness and engagement in current affairs has been developed, and the following statements from three different learners, representative of many, demonstrate Greene's 'becoming wide-awake to the world' (1995:3):

It really helped build my awareness of what was happening in the news and often made me read further into articles / issues I was previously unaware of.

I wasn't really aware of what was going on in the world at all, I only look at Facebook which is terrible I know, but thanks to what you've shown us, there's a whole lot more out there.

If it wasn't for you doing that, I wouldn't have any idea of what's going on.

These comments, while of concern to hear from adults preparing to be educators of young people and adults, do show how the photography found a way to move beyond what Greene (1995) describes as the preoccupations of our own private worlds. Another typical comment further illustrating this was: 'I think we've become more engaged in politics and stuff' further illustrating this.

With regard to personal change, two examples are given here. One learner said in conversation during the middle of her course that:

I've been brought up in a bubble, my Dad's put me in a bubble, so anything in my bubble I keep in my bubble. I've got to come out of my bubble, yeah, it's making me a lot more aware now, looking at the pictures. I think it's going to be really hard for me to come out of my bubble though because it's going to make me, it's started to make me think that I need to start engaging with, (pause) the world.

Engagement with current affairs through photography each week was starting to have an impact on this learner. The activity appeared to be having a gradual, incremental and cumulative effect on her, and some personal transformation was taking place. During an end of course interview, the learner was asked about her earlier reference to her 'bubble' and she reflected that:

I was enclosed. I only wanted to focus on what I was doing, and it's not enough. I'm still in my bubble. But mine isn't the only one.

This comment would seem to be illustrative of a 'disorienting dilemma'. The learner was recognising the change in 'who she had been and who she was now', engaging in critical self-reflection about herself as both a person and a potential teacher.

Another learner said that the photographs 'have brought me closer, closer to the real world' and described the change in her as 'it feels like I'm a real person now'. She gave the example of how she had previously distanced herself in life generally and also in the exercise from what she called 'hard topics' explaining that:

I always used to pick a really beautiful scenic image, and I kind of thought, there's so much going on in the world, and you know, I don't want to ignore that [pause] and I thought I never go to the war ones [pause] what's going on in the world, you can't just ignore it, you have to acknowledge it, and I ended up standing next to a photo of, I think it was Aleppo.

She linked this change in her to a class discussion, remembering 'there was that time we were talking about how what you choose is kind of like a reflection of you, kind of like who you are'. This appeared to be the catalyst for critical reflection and change and she later wrote that 'instead of avoiding those images I have started to engage more with these tough subjects', also saying she had since watched documentaries about the Iraq war and the Syrian conflict. This learner's story illustrates Eisner's (2008:10) view that through the arts, awareness and humanity can be expanded. The learner's reflection can be described as critical and part of a process leading to transformative change, and what Greene describes as a 'fuller and more adequate experience of what it signifies to be human and to inhabit a multifaceted world' (1981:115).

The photographs opened a positive 'discursive space' (Blom 2017:2), they were a 'good tool to find voice and reflect' said one learner. That this space was felt to be 'safe' was mentioned many times by learners. Comments that it was 'an open and accepting forum', and that 'it was a great activity to look forward to and I oddly found comfort in the routine of it, especially as there were no right or wrong answers!' also support this. It would seem the photographs provided many ways to safely access and discuss things such as politics, economics, equality, society and culture. 'We were able to engage visually on our own terms' wrote one learner. The independent curation and broad subject range of the photographs by the newspaper (not just the 'object as subject' Dyer 2013:xvi) was deemed important by many and facilitated what a learner described as 'areas for debate/discussion/discourse'. On one occasion a learner said of her chosen photograph of refugees being given a home by a UK family, 'it restores your faith in humanity and them dogs are really cute', illustrating the accessibility of the photographs at many levels. Many learners mentioned the challenge to beliefs and perceptions and the 'deeper thinking' promoted through discussion; one person described it as a 'getting rid of pre-conceptions'. These findings support the view of Jarvis and Gouthro (2015:67) that with the arts 'mental space opens up that creates the possibility for deeper, critical thought'.

It is to be noted that any reservations about the Eyewitness project have been extremely limited. One learner commented that sometimes there were more things she wanted to say but didn't, for 'fears of being too political on topics of race, ethics etc'. Another challenge mentioned was a worry of not being able to 'contribute anything deep or controversial', although the range of photographs and activity itself had meant this was not a pressure.

There were many learner comments about the impact on professional life and how the project had already positively influenced and would continue to influence future practice as inclusive teachers and lecturers. Being a 'witness' to the 'Eyewitness' photographs on a regular and sustained basis has clearly been part of the development of their emerging teacher identities.

'No fringe undertaking' : conclusion

The research has shown the potential for high quality photojournalism to raise awareness and interest in current affairs, and to promote rich discussion, dialogue and critical reflection. Findings show greater awareness of social, cultural, economic and political events in the world with evidence of changes in the 'worldview' (Hoggan 2016:9) of trainee teachers. These changes have not been 'just additive knowledge' (Hoggan 2016:10), but 'something more meaningful' (Blom 2017:2) and often a consideration, examination and questioning of power, privilege, ethics, equality and diversity. Considering and responding to the 'Eyewitness' photographs in class every week has developed into a rich and meaningful experience for both myself, the tutor, and for the trainees with any expectations exceeded; it has become no 'fringe undertaking' or 'frill' (Greene 2001:7).

Kegan (2000:35) has asked 'what *form* transforms?', and the data shows that an educator or trainer does *not* need to be a creative arts practitioner in order to use the arts in their teaching and training, and that students do *not* need to engage in creative processes, as the act of 'witness' itself can have great value. Structured student 'witness' of art can promote a greater awareness of the world, deepen self-awareness, foster critical reflection and influence values; these may be a precursor to change in an individual and transformative learning. The research has demonstrated the potential of the arts, in this case photography, to have a powerful and positive impact when used in professional adult education.

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