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COLLAGE AND CRITICAL THINKING: WHAT THE POP ARTISTS TAUGHT ME ABOUT DOING SOCIOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Drawing on David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC), I reflect here on how my experiences as an art history and theory teacher led me to consider collaging as a heuristic device for small groups of sociology learners. Since 2014, I have worked as a teaching fellow in Sociology, Gender Studies and Criminology (SGSC), University of Otago, where I support teaching into three large first-year sociology (SOCI) papers. My background is in art history and theory, with a special interest in the social foundations of art. From 2018–2020 I was seconded to lecture in Art History and Visual Culture (ARTV), University of Otago. During this time, I taught a pop art paper and introduced students to collaging through an assessment.

Teaching simultaneously in ARTV and SOCI led me to critically reflect on my experiences as an art history and theory teacher, and to consider how I could use these experiences to enhance first-year teaching and learning in sociology. In my teaching, I observed that ARTV learners were better able to understand and apply theoretical concepts because they could visualise them. Despite the growth of visual sociology (Becker, 1995; Harper, 1988; Grady, 1996; Pink, 2012), sociology continues to be perceived as a “discipline of words” (Winddance Twine, 2016, p. 967). There is, however, a disjunction between the ability to read words on paper and our “frames of reference” – the signs, symbols and language which are the foundations for our thoughts, feelings and assumptions (Mezirow, 2010, p. 21). Seeing, or organising data through our eyes, involves frames of reference which we then use to explain the world around us. As John Berger famously noted, “Seeing comes before words” (Berger, 1977, p. 7).

As part of my sociology teaching, I run a range of supplementary support tutorials across the first year, working with college halls and on-campus indigenous groups, as well as holding extensive one-to-one consultation sessions with a broad range of learners, including those who identify as neurodiverse and older, or returning, learners. It is within the context of these smaller supplementary tutorials and one-to-one consultation sessions that I trialed collaging as a tool to help students understand key concepts in sociology – notably intersectionality, a theoretical framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw posits that individuals can have overlapping experiences of privilege and/or discrimination, which are fluid and context-dependent (Crenshaw, 1989).

Developed by John Dewey in 1938, the concept of experiential learning has undergone various iterations. At its core it foregrounds direct experience and engagement with the processes of that experience: learning by doing (Dewey, 1938, cited in Kolb, 2015, p. 5). Laboratory work; field trips and projects; studio-based learning such as that which occurs in art and design education; internships and apprenticeships all constitute forms of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015). The Experiential Learning Cycle was adapted by David Kolb from the Lewinian Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 2015, pp. 32, 51; Gibbs, 1988, p. 1). The ELC is a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” Stage 1 of the ELC involves experience, stage 2 reflection, stage 3 conceptualisation and stage 4 experimentation (Kolb, 2015, pp. 49–51).

My experiences in ARTV led me to reflect on my teaching experiences in SOCI, and through this reflection I began to conceptualise new tools for teaching, which I then experimented with in supplementary tutorials and one-to-one meetings with learners. Critical reflection is pivotal to transformation; as Graham Gibbs notes, “it is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten or its learning potential lost” (Gibbs, 1988, p. 1). The affective dimension of reflection can lead to new ideas and concepts which can be deployed to develop new initiatives and approaches (Gibbs, 1988).

COLLAGING AS AN ART HISTORY ASSESSMENT

Collage, the process of cutting and pasting material onto a flat surface, originates from the French verb *coller*, which translates as “to stick” (Butler-Kisber, 2017, p. 2). In Pop Art, Fashion and Consumer Culture, a 200/300-level paper that I designed, I set a collage as the first assignment. The assessment is introduced in the first tutorial, which takes place at the Hocken Collections/Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago. Staff at the Hocken set aside source material, magazines and ephemera from the 1950s and 1960s for the exercise. The assessment is based on an article by John-Paul Stonard (2007) which explores the process and meaning behind Richard Hamilton’s collage, *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?* (1956).

The instructions are as follows:

1. Using the resources from the Hocken Collections create a collage which, like Hamilton’s *Just what it is that makes today’s home’s so different, so appealing?* (1956), represents the zeitgeist (spirit of the time). You can use a camera to capture the images or have photocopies made by Hocken staff. [There was no cutting of archival material.]
2. Please ensure you take note of where the images were sourced from, you will need to reference them in your commentary.
3. The collage should be presented on A3 paper and should only use techniques available at the time, i.e., no photostopping, but you can draw and paint on the collage. The collage will be assessed on the following criteria:
 - a. The collage is visually coherent and reflects a theme, for instance you may want to focus on homes or interiors like Hamilton, or you may choose to focus on fashion, the automobile, gender, or outer space.
 - b. Your collage has a title which appropriately reflects its theme.
 - c. The material used is from a specific and coherent timeframe, i.e., 1955 to 1957, not 1951 and 1964.
 - d. At least FOUR images/or pieces of text are used.
 - e. If text is used, the text must be relevant to the period.
 - f. A 600-word [1,000 words for 300-level] commentary is submitted with the collage. This commentary should reflect on the sources used, and explain why you chose the material you did, i.e., what is it about the images you have chosen which speak of the time? Stonard’s essay provides a template for how to do this.
 - g. All sources must be correctly referenced.

The goals of the assessment are to enable learners to:

1. Experience and reflect on a technique deployed by pop artists: collage (stage 1 of the ELC).
2. Understand that “an image in Pop Art is in a new context” (Alloway, cited in Lippard, 1966, p. 27) (stages 1 and 2 of the ELC).
3. Develop an understanding of the twentieth century as the American century, focusing on the 1950s and 1960s (stage 3 of the ELC).
4. Contextualise the themes explored by pop artists, such as the gendered representation of consumer goods (stages 2 and 3 of the ELC).

The process of learners looking at material from the historical period under discussion and reframing what they see is transformative (stage 4 of the ELC). The collage is the first piece of assessment in ARTV and serves as a scaffold for the other two pieces of written assessment: an essay plan and a research essay. Students who produce a collage on an aspect of gender, for example, will go on to write a research essay on this topic. In

grading learners' research essays, I felt that their collaging work had enabled them to engage with their research topic on a deeper level because the re-arranging of material had facilitated new ways of thinking.

University of Otago teaching evaluations, where students have the opportunity to anonymously comment on course materials and teaching methods, were used to gauge the effectiveness of the collage assessment. Feedback from the ARTV learners was positive. One survey respondent noted: "The assessments (especially the collage) are very fun yet critical." Learning as fun is a common theme in the feedback: "It was very helpful in focusing knowledge and [the] mind on [a] particular era, was fun to look at old advertisements and getting a good idea of that time in history." Other learners indicated that the collage helped them understand the "techniques the artists use" and was a "really effective research tool." Learners also provided feedback that helped refine the assessment; for instance, they asked for examples, and for the size of the collage to increase from an A4 presentation to an A3 format. With learners' permission, I exhibited their work outside my office. The learners enjoyed seeing what their peers did and it helped them consider other elements of representation.

REFLECTING ON COLLAGING AS A TOOL TO FACILITATE THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

As I neared the end of my secondment to ARTV, I reflected on collaging as a learning tool and the potential for using this technique in first-year sociology teaching.

Collaging motivated ARTV learners to engage in-depth with the course material. Motivation is the fifth obstacle to learning, as identified by Middendorf and Pace in their "Decoding the Disciplines: Seven Steps to Overcome Obstacles to Learning" diagram (2004, p. 3). One obstacle to learning that I have observed in sociology is motivating learners to read and engage with scholarship beyond the memorisation of concepts – a surface approach (Ramsden, 2003). To facilitate transformative learning and ignite the sociological imagination, learners should be able to apply what they read to everyday conversations and assessments. C. Wright Mills's notion of the sociological imagination – the argument that to gain deeper insights into our personal troubles we need to understand the relationship between our own lives and larger social issues, as well as historical patterns (Mills, 1959) – is the key threshold concept in sociology (Thomas, 2020).

Considering stage 5 of Middendorf and Pace's (2004) obstacles to learning cycle, I believe that the affective factors inhibiting reading and engagement among sociology learners are twofold. One, the emphasis on reading does not correlate with how we see the world. Two, the difference between a growth and a fixed mindset is critical: a person with the former embraces challenges such as a difficult reading, whereas a person with the latter can give up if the task is too hard (Dweck, 2016). For me, the comment from an ARTV learner that collage was "fun yet critical" sums up what good teaching should be about. It should engage learners in ways that are relevant to them, shift mindsets and be transformative.

Sociology's emphasis on words implies that to do sociology a student needs to master complex definitions in written text. Privileging words over images is a bottleneck that blocks transformative learning (Middendorf & Pace, 2004, p. 3), as this approach does not align with how learners experience the world. Learners tell me that they understand better by "doing," and some attend consultation hours with elaborate essay-planning mind maps of images and drawings that demonstrate their understanding and application of the theories presented in lectures and discussed in the regular class tutorials.

In reflecting on SOCI learners, the material they would bring to consultation hours, and the comments about learning that they would make in supplementary tutorials, I began to see parallels between learners' experiences of engaging with material and the process of collaging used in ARTV. Collaging is an experiential approach to research that aids learners in unpacking concepts (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Through the process of cutting, pasting and moving material around, collaging enables "making thoughts complex, facilitating the thinking, writing and talking about the inquiry" (Butler-Kisber, 2017, p. 2).

Possessing a sociological imagination is transformative. For transformation to occur, however, learners need to see things anew, to alter their “frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2010, p. 21). Jennifer Garvey Berger argues that “without new lenses through which to view new possibilities, question old assumptions, and so on – it is unlikely to lead to new actions” (Garvey Berger, 2004, p. 337). In acknowledging the transformative nature of the sociological imagination, Thomas also notes that it “can also be *troublesome* for learners and they may spend a considerable time in an uncomfortable *liminal state* as they struggle to grasp it” (Thomas, 2020, p. 114).

I believe that the “*troublesome[ness]*” and “*liminal state*” identified by Thomas arise because learners believe that to understand sociology they need to master difficult theories, like intersectionality, through reading words on paper. This belief is at odds with the ‘seeing’ metaphors that populate course material, as well as with Mills’s references to vision as the key to unlocking the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959).

The emphasis on writing skills embedded into the traditional assessment structure signals that writing is the key to mastering the discipline, igniting the sociological imagination and developing the critical skills that mark out a sociologist. Mary Moynihan argues that essay-type assessments in sociology imply that there is “an affinity between the concept of writing as a tool of learning and C. Wright Mills’s concern with the sociological imagination” (Moynihan, 1989, p. 346, cited in Delaney et al., 1995, p. 354). Yet, as noted, the sociological imagination foregrounds the visual (Mills, 1959). Delaney et al. (1995, p. 354) describe pure writing and research assessment methods as “recipes without ingredients.” These assessments may make learners write better, but do not teach them how to think like a sociologist. Rather, such assessments suggest that a sociologist looks like someone who has competence in the vocabulary (Delaney et al., 1995). Learners can easily *define* a concept taken from a textbook, but often do not really *understand* it: a surface approach to learning (Thomas, 2020).

I have used the Essay Burger model (Roundtaiwanround, n.d.) to help learners understand the writing process, but this can lead to an overemphasis on meeting the technical requirements of an essay rather than attention to the “ingredients” (Delaney et al., 1995, p. 354). When shown the Essay Burger, learners typically ask me, “How many paragraphs should I have? The burger has three.” Further, the burger model follows the traditional linear method of writing, positing writing as a formula that involves layers which can be easily assembled. Writing, in contrast, is “messy” and a “craft” (Cameron et al., 2009, p. 270).

The notion of writing as a craft foregrounds process rather than product. Learners will often ask if we have a template, a product that they can look at to replicate. The Essay Burger is the closest thing to a template we provide, due to concerns that examples of former learners’ work will lead to duplications of that work, rather than a direct original engagement with material, thus undermining learner development. An emphasis on process rather than product has parallels in design education. In this discipline, emphasising the process as messy and non-linear removes any “naïve belief that there is a simple sequence from working drawings to final product: [students] realise how messy the real process of design is” (Ramsden, 2003, p. 165). While Cameron et al. (2009) focus on academic and postgraduate writing, their observations correspond with my reflections on the writing experiences of undergraduate learners, where difficulty grasping the process of writing can, as the authors note, “erode the confidence” of writers (2009, p. 269).

FROM POP ART TO SOCIOLOGY

Reflecting on the difficulties of teaching writing, the concept of intersectionality and catering to growing student diversity in first-year sociology led me back to the world of the pop artists. Pop artists were interested in exploring their lived environment, and the overlapping elements of the collage process replicated this: “Thus, artists were revealing a sense of the city as ... a symbol-thick scene, criss-crossed with the tracks of human activity” (Alloway, 1966, p. 40). These artists were interested in how individuals mediated their own identity in a shared visual culture, deciphering the signs and symbols of everyday life, and turned to sociology, anthropology and the mass observation movement as sources of inspiration and theoretical frameworks (Spencer, 2012).

Like the pop artists of the 1960s, learners in sociology are also interested in exploring their own experiences (Thomas, 2020; Delaney et al., 1995). In thinking about the challenges of transferring techniques from SOCI to ARTV, I came across the musings of Kay Mars: "Can we teach about intersectional theory, without taking into account the intersectional lives and lived realities of ourselves and those who are engaging in our classes?" (Mars, 2020, n. p.). Here Mars is highlighting the difference between intersectionality as a theory, a tool for learning, and teaching intersectionally – that is, recognising the diversity of the student cohort. "Teaching intersectionally ... means adjusting your teaching – regardless of the content – to the imaginaries and life worlds of learners, so that what is being taught becomes recognizable and meaningful to them" (Mars, 2020, n. p.).

I suggest that this can be achieved through collaging, a process that enables learners to visualise and experience the complexity of intersectionality through the process of moving material from one context to another, in a way that makes sense to them. Collage assessments also scaffold writing (Butler-Kisber, 2017, p. 2).

Janet Stewart argues that to comprehend complex terms like globalisation, an invisible idea "couched in terms such as 'flows', 'globalizing forces', and 'surface appearances,'" alternative modes of "knowledge construction" are required (2012, p. 368). Drawing on the work of Michael Harris, she argues that art makes visible complex theory, ideas we cannot see, thus "potentially offering a transformative function" (Harris, 2006, p. 213, cited in Stewart, 2012, p. 369). Stewart analyses Ursula Biermann's film *Black Sea Files* (2005) which uses fade-ins, camera pans and close-ups to highlight the scale of globalisation. In one scene, for example, Biermann juxtaposes massive oil storage tanks with the small figure of an individual (Stewart, 2012). It would be difficult to ask first-year students to master the techniques of film to explore theory, but a collage assessment has potential because it is easy to do.

Collage is non-linear and thus replicates how we see, and it can accommodate diverse perspectives: "[C]ollage reflects the very way we see the world with objects being given meaning not from something within themselves, but rather through the way we perceive how they stand in relationship to one another" (Robertson, 2000, p. 2, cited in Butler-Kisber, 2017, p. 3). Robertson's reference to understanding relationships between things alludes to the potential for collaging to be used as a pedagogical tool for intersectionality because of the way that an object or symbol changes meaning in different contexts. As pop artist Edouardo Paolozzi argues:

Symbols can be integrated in different ways. The watch as a calculating machine or jewel, a door as a panel or an art object, the skull as a death symbol in the west, or symbol for the moon in the east, camera as luxury or necessity. (Paolozzi, 1958, cited in Lippard, 1966, p. 35)

One difficulty in teaching intersectionality to sociology learners is getting them to understand that individuals may experience privilege in one context, but not in another. The non-linear approach of collaging imitates intersectionality. Collage, "like concept maps, has the advantage of producing a web of connections instead of linear ones. At the same time ... the joining of disparate fragments can produce associations and connections that bring unconscious thoughts to the surface" (Butler-Kisber, 2017, p. 4). These webs of connection mirror intersectionality and through odd associations, "frames of reference" (Mezirow, 2010, p. 21) can be altered.

Popularised by the European avant-garde and the pop artists, collaging can include visual material, artefacts such as pieces of fabric, and written text; it offers learners an alternative way of synthesising material that moves away from the traditional linear model of writing and organising material; and as this shift occurs new meanings can be created (Sanchez, 1999). In this process, the "tacit, or what has remained unconscious, bubbles to the surface" (Butler-Kisber, 2017, p. 4). The laying bare of tacit knowledge through the process of collaging opens the door for new ways of seeing; what Mannay calls "making the familiar strange" (Mannay, 2010, p. 91), a key precept in sociology (Garfinkel, 1967, cited in Scott, 2015, p. 1).

COLLAGING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Reflecting on collaging within pre-service teacher training, Donna McDermott has spoken of the transformative potential of this process, enabling the diversity of learners' experiences to be revealed, re-emphasising a student-centered approach to teaching and encouraging learners to find new links and question old ideas (McDermott, 2002, p. 65). Similarly, Felice Yuen used collage for a participatory action research project that explored the "meaning of healing with Aboriginal women and the meaning of leisure in their experiences of healing" (Yuen, 2016, p. 338). Yuen deployed collage to shift away from "binary" forms of knowledge construction towards fluid interpretations in order to honor "indigenous forms of knowing" (Yuen, 2016, p. 339). Elena Vacchelli has employed collaging to collect data from migrant women about their experiences of migration and access to mental health. This methodology allowed different stories and subject positions to be foregrounded and gave the women control over how their experiences were represented (Vacchelli, 2018). In addition, Chiara Bacigalupa has used collaging as a method of communication between parents and teachers within a university-based child care centre. She found it led to deeper understandings of the relationship between child development and play and resulted in better parent/teacher communication (Bacigalupa, 2016).

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY THROUGH CUTTING AND PASTING

Grasping intersectionality is crucial to igniting the sociological imagination and understanding the differences and divisions between race, class and gender within Aotearoa New Zealand, a core objective of one of the first-year papers I teach into. For the essay topic in this paper, learners are asked to pick two social divisions and analyse the cross-cutting intersections between either race/class, race/gender or gender/ethnicity.

Intersectionality is a notoriously difficult concept to grasp. However, in supplementary tutorials and office consultations, I introduced learners who were struggling to conceptualise material to collaging. This was done organically, and where I could see students having difficulty putting words on paper I showed them how they could collage their ideas in order to see things differently. Through this process, which involves a deliberate consideration and placement of material in a new context, learners became active participants in mapping intersections and thus became engaged in a deep learning process. As I worked with these students, I observed how the process of collaging (stage 1 ELC) was enabling them to develop deeper understandings of cross-cutting intersections (stage 2 ELC), thus allowing them to think about what they knew in different ways (stage 3 ELC) and to draw new conclusions (stage 4 ELC).

Ramsden (2003) distinguishes between deep and surface learning approaches. A surface approach is manifest through memorisation, whereas deep approaches focus on what learners know and seek to extend this knowledge through the application of theory to experience (Ramsden, 2003, p. 47). The deep approach, stage 4 of the ELC, is transformative, opening "a window through which aspects of reality become visible and more intelligible" (Entwistle & Martin, 1984, cited in Ramsden, 2003, p. 47).

Surface approaches focus only on meeting the requirements of the assessment (Ramsden, 2003). As Burmark (2008), Winddance Twine (2016) and Jordaan & Jordaan (2013) have argued, deeper learning occurs when we combine seeing with speaking and writing. While working with SOCI learners I observed that collaging enabled them to visualise concepts, reflect out loud on their own social locations and develop stories which they could then fashion into a thesis statement for their research essay. Collaging not only aided these learners in developing a deeper understanding of theory, but it helped them engage with writing in a non-linear and intuitive way (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Perceiving the writing process as linear can hinder the transfer of ideas to paper (Cameron et al., 2009). Several of the students I worked with in supplementary tutorials tell me that they now use collaging to plan out all their essays.

CONCLUSION

As the literature on the use of collage in teaching suggests, this form of assessment helps learners visualise concepts and accommodates diverse perspectives, features which would work well for sociology papers where learners often like to explore their own experiences. Enabling learners to visualise their essay through the process of collaging gives them more autonomy in constructing and developing their own knowledge – a key facet of transformative learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 100) – thus acknowledging a familiar teaching experience in sociology that “learners themselves often experience their first exposure to the discipline as transformative, with many referring to it ‘opening their eyes’ or ‘broadening their perspective’” (Thomas, 2020, p. 114). Collage assessments also “level the playing field” for learners, some of whom are not well prepared for first-year study at university (Middendorf & Pace, 2004, p. 3).

While I have so far deployed collaging only in smaller support tutorials and one-to-one office hours, there is potential to extend this approach to the wider student cohort, as what the learners in these informal groups were able to do was realise our lives as more than one-dimensional experiences. Collaging enabled them to imagine the moving and shifting forces that shape our existence.

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