

Living in and learning within urban space: “Visual dialogue” as a creative approach, through performative drawings, to explore and express city life experiences in the subject of art and crafts

Samira Jamouchi
*Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences
Oslo, Norway*

Abstract

Cities open themselves up to different ways of being explored, experienced, and expressed by the inhabitants. Newcomers and natives each bring unique perspectives on the cities they inhabit. This paper describes an arts-based research design I call “visual dialogue,” in which I ask persons to express, through drawings and words, their subjective urban experiences. The ongoing drawing process itself, rather than any finished product, is the heart of this practice. In this paper, I give one examples of a Visual Dialogues and I present some philosophical perspectives that can motivate art and crafts teachers to engage with more fluid and explorative teaching practice in the subject of art and craft, connected to urban experience. Especially in international classes with university students as a means of fostering communication across cultural and individual differences.

Key words: Arts-based research, urban experience, visual dialogue, intra-active pedagogy, new materialism

Introduction

An individual’s subjective experience of the city is not easy to articulate. The lived experience of the city goes beyond a neutral metric description of an urban space and encompasses – above and beyond a more-or-less shared grammar of a city’s basic layout – bodily entanglements, social and institutional relations, affect, memories, stories. Visual Dialogue is a way of exploring – through drawing – personal experience of the city in a fluid and visual way. By using this approach, the art and crafts teacher can give international teacher students the opportunity to explore, express and share their respective personal urban experience with peers that also take a part of their study abroad. This approach is less normative and more explorative, open for discussion on individual and cultural differences and the varied experiences of natives and newcomers.

The unfolding of a Visual Dialogue

The Visual Dialogue starts after a preamble: A conversation lasting about an hour, in which I introduce myself and present the project’s topic, and the participant narrates the city she/he lives in. After that we have a better understanding of each other’s expectations and relation to the topic (urban experience). By having this settled down I feel that we approach a stage of maturation that give us the possibility to go further in another way of

Living in and learning within urban space: “Visual dialogue” as a creative approach, through performative drawings, to explore and express city life experiences in the subject of art and crafts

communicating with each other. Namely, by using drawings. And I turn on a video camera to record the performed drawing.

The actual visual dialogue is thus carried out after a verbal dialogue about the city. My demand is formulate as following:

Draw the city on this (A3) sheet of paper with those pencils
Draw the whole city; the scale is not so very important
You can start with your neighbourhood, a part of the city you know well or use often
Draw *your* city, the city as *you* see it

At this point, the participant starts to draw, with a video camera recording the drawing as it is being “performed.”

Then I invite participants to tell me about the city they are drawing as they draw. Some participants are very verbal. It is easy for them to talk while drawing. They can say something about what they are drawing at the very moment they draw it, and they can likewise talk detachedly or abstractly about their experience of the city while drawing the city. These very verbal subjects can dive into full-blown narratives as they draw, sometimes remembering some detail that was missing or forgotten, and add it to the drawing – reminiscent of the snowball effect Spencer (2007) describes, wherein drawing conjures a process of remembering. Other participants seem to be more intensively engaged in the drawing and resist conversation, even while I sense an active inner dialogue on the part of the one drawing. I go along with whichever style suits the subject at the moment.

The way I bring up my request about the drawings of the cities leads to a relatively free understanding of *what* and *how* it could be drawn. Some of drawings made by the participants look like a map emphasising the geographical features, or a more personal understanding of a place/city. Other drawing shows the participants’ relationship to the city or have a more neutral/common expression. A drawing can show different elements (houses, streets, parks, landmarks, shops, and so on), or it can show social relationships (either private or more general social relationship).

My request for the drawing can be presented in slightly various ways and my questions can be presented in different order. No matter how much we inter-act during the drawing process, the participant is not alone. We sit together during the drawing process, with an open invitation to talk, comment, ask questions, give responses, and so on. Drawing is a communicative act, and the very act of drawing, as well as the participant’s response to the materiality of the drawing in process, can provoke clarity or new understanding on the part of the participant.

It is the process of drawing that is the main substance here, not the final product. That process includes the ongoing dialogue, while the participant is drawing, that ideally provokes nuanced and fresh communication about the participant’s experience of the city. Visual Dialogue aims to bring to awareness perhaps previously unarticulated knowledge and feelings about the city on the part of the participant in the process of communication by drawing. Caused by the visual feedback of the subject’s own marks on the paper.

A video of a visual dialogue about Fez

My parents are originally from Morocco. I was born and grew up in Brussels, and for 20 years I've lived in Oslo. Having visited Morocco nearly every year of my life, I feel both like an insider and an outsider in that country. In 2009, I undertook a fieldwork in Morocco to meet native Norwegians who had moved and settled down there. This project resulted in a video titled "Visual Dialogue on Fez" (available at <https://vimeo.com/182381950>).

The video shows edited fragments using drawings and oral narrative that aim to convey how the city is experienced and interpreted by a Norwegian woman who had been living in Fez for five years.

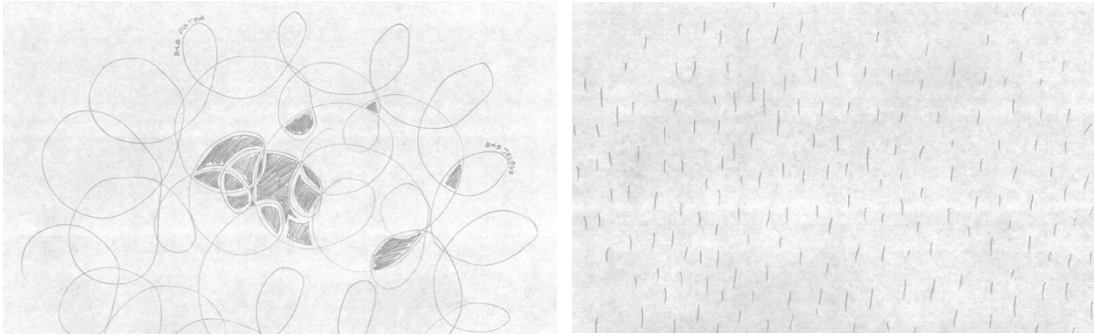
The video shows how the participant is deeply involved in her drawing. Her thoughts about the city, her act of drawing, the imagined and revealed city her drawing conveys, and her verbal descriptions of Fez are all intertwined. The Visual Dialogue (between the two of us and herself whilst performing the drawing) resulted in moving pictures interweaving the participants' performed drawing, and some of my own photographs, of Fez.

These combinations of her narration and drawings of the city are compiled with my own photos of Fez, creating a palimpsest of still and moving images, audio records, and transcribed texts. The spectator is invited to join the dialogue between the participant, who disclose her personal experiences of a city, as she relates to her subjective position. Drawing from arts-based research approach, this video work is free from positivistic categorisations of the city or normative views on the city of Fez.

The figures below are screenshots from the video. The first is a collage of two photographs I took in Fez showing the city from two different positions (nadir/bottom and zenith/top). The next two figures below are two drawings made by the participant: Fez on the left, Oslo on the right.



Figure 1. Fez: A composed picture I edited from two different points of views from the city of Fez, Morocco. This juxtaposition shows an overview of the medina seen from roof terrace (called *stah* in Arabic), contrasting with a small pathway (called *deb* in Arabic) on the ground level.



Figures 2 & 3. Fez: Two drawings made by a participant during our visual dialogue, using words and drawings to express her experience of the city. On the left: the city of Fez (Morocco) and the right the city of Oslo (Norway).

When I ask her about the nature of those lines, this participant describes the urban space of Fez as a long, sinuous path that leads the inhabitants in a natural way, as the streets of the city follows its environmental landscape.

She describes Oslo as a set of discontinuing spaces distributed non-interactively throughout in the landscape, that she mentions as appearing randomly in the landscape. She comments the recurrence of short vertical lines she drew as elements of the city that are disconnected from its natural environment.

In my previous work about urban experiences, with the video installation “Her city”, I endeavor to bring forth the urban experience of two female participants. The art project “Her city” gives the viewer a unique position to interpret and approach somebody else urban experience. In the following section I shall explain closely what the project “Her city” was about. Even if I was not using the “methodology” of a Visual Dialogue I wish to describe how I worked with the topic of urban experience. By doing so, the next section should contextualize the thematic of this paper (the experience of the city) and how I approach it from a subjective, affective and open-ended approach.

The video installation “Her City”

Understanding our experiences of the city, or talking about them, involves emotion, esthetic approach, and self-awareness. These are the aspects of experience I was trying to highlight in my video installation “Her City”, about Oslo and Tangier, and the play of public and private spaces in each city, as seen through experiences of two women one Moroccan and one Norwegian, native from the two respective countries. (See more at <http://du-store-verden.no/article.php?story=20080314165640134>)

While this was not a Visual Dialogue per se – the work followed from interviews I conducted with two participants whose stories I collected – the ethos of the project illustrates key aspects of Visual Dialogue. In “Her City,” I endeavored to put my pre-understandings on the side and let the participants express their stories in their own way, letting myself follow the direction of the narratives, and accepting that a story can be approached from different perspectives but still will not be definitively contained by the words and pictures by which it is expressed.

My interest was not the detached, abstract city, but the lived one. I wanted to explore how these two women perceive the city's morphological and iconographic elements, but also

the interrelation between its different parts. Such as Tangier's diverse cultural live and Oslo's suburbs and its new neighborhoods. The goal was to get an understanding of the city by filming public spaces as seen through the participants' personal relations to these areas. A significant aspect was that the natives could tell me the story of the city that history could not give me.



Figure 4. Snapshot from the video edited in two part: the left side shows a female native inhabitant of Tangier telling her experience of her city: “Tangier and its cultural diversity has affected us”. The right side shows every-day scenes in the street.



Figure 3. Snapshot from the video edited in two parts: the left side shows a female native inhabitant of Oslo telling her experience of her city: “Oslo had several communities, but they were very similar”. The right side shows every-day scenes in the street.

Methodological considerations

A number of methodological approaches, philosophical considerations, and expressive techniques have inspired and offer some grounding for Visual Dialogue.

The materiality of the city is perceived through its textures, sounds, colours, open and closed spaces, luminosity and darkness, its odours and atmosphere, etc. Those sensory and inevitably in part aesthetically apprehended elements and features shape and affect

inhabitants in the urban environment. As well, our experience of the city takes place through an emotional overlay related to the city’s materiality, and also the individual’s history, memories, and networks of social relations. The experience of the city is manifold and not fully conscious. In particular, daily routines of city life can, as Georges Perec (1936-1982) said, lead to a “a kind of blindness that paralyzes us” (Perec, 2000) because might not see the urban environments as we go through it with daily routines.

Provoking respondents into producing visual materials – or using found visual media – in order to explore the urban experience has been used by practitioners working in different fields, urban planning (Lynch, 1961), social sciences (Pink, 2006; Rose, 2001; Spencer, 2011), and participatory design (Rehal, 2006) among them, and involving images as well as drawings (Lynch and Spencer), videos (Rose and Pink), and photographs (Rehal). Lynch for instance, an urban planner, has people draw their “mental maps” of the city or neighbourhoods where they live or work, in order to get deeper information about how cities work (or fail to). Spencer, as a sociologist, uses the same method to see how people make sense of place. Ethnographers Rose and Pink make mappings of the city using visual culture – including photographs, films, and social media. Rehal uses photographs in participatory process to involve end-users at an early stage of design.

In his inaugural 1977 lecture at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes distinguished two different ways of understanding method: 1) a clearly defined protocol of operations with the ideal of attaining a specified goal versus 2) an approach that that can be understood as a violent breaking with our routines and forcing us beyond a comfort zone, taking us, ideally, into a place of discovery and creativity.

With respect to inhabitants’ relations to cities, an example of Barthes’ first method would be giving respondents a survey – an instrument which would, inevitably, already delimit and encode many presumptions about the possible results. Visual Dialogue, by contrast, is inspired by Barthes’ second kind of method, with much less presumption about the fruits of the inquiry into participants’ experience of the city, and a method willing to embrace – and pursue further – what may first seem to be undigested fragments of subjects’ perceptions.

A such approach of the city can inscribe itself in a post-qualitative performed teaching in the field of education. Karen Barad (2007) describes intra-action as the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. The prefix *-intra* enable to think about relationship between two entities, within the relationship, as an entangled state of interdependence (not outside the relationship, as it could be understood with the prefix *-inter*). The word agency is about the ability to act. The compound word intra-active is about action taking place within the relationship, not independently or outside it. Agency occur within the relationship; it does not pre-exist separately. Always in motion and unfolding while the relationship occurs. The relationship may occur both between human and human, as well as between human and non-human. In the case of Visual Dialogue, the intra-action occurs between the participant and her drawing, at the very moment while the person is drawing her city and simultaneously getting visual feedback from her hand making marks on the paper, while thinking and inscribing those marks on the paper.

Those views are taken further by Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010) in the field of education. She introduces an intra-active pedagogy focusing on the use of pedagogical documentation as a tool for learning and transformation. In her book from 2010 she

discusses examples of how pens, paper, clay and construction materials can be understood as active and performative agent. And from an onto-epistemological approach she looks at learning from the perspective of “being-of-the-world” (Lenz Taguchi 2010, 51), breaking the dichotomy between “I”- subject and “matter” - object (ibid.). The responsiveness of the material, from clay in Lenz Taguchi example, in line with drawings of the city on the paper as described in Visual Dialogue, make evident that “Learning thus often involve emotions, affection, lust, desire and imagination that we do not usually acknowledge” (Lenz Taguchi 2010, 59).

This attention given to body entangled with non-human material has been expressed by one of my students when working with another type of performative drawing when she expressed her feeling of intra-action with the paper she drew on: “I became a part of the paper”.

Science tries to discover universal principles and is characterized by the classification of phenomena into causally relevant categories (McNiff, 1998:96). Arts-based research resists positivist standards, allowing creative approaches that can follow unexpected pathways. Art-based researchers are not “discovering” new research tools so much as “carving” them (Leavy, 2009:1). This means that methods from the artistic domain deals with knowledge in a broad sense: more methodologically wide-open and contextually adaptive. This approach I describe here – aimed at inviting individuals to visually articulate their felt relation to the city – is particularly open-ended. Drawing on arts-based research philosophy, a Visual Dialogue aims to steer clear of overt categorizations or normativity, willing to foster a creative, open-minded stance in viewers to the material at hand and their own thinking about their relation to cities.

Visual dialogue in the classroom

These methodological considerations and philosophical underpinnings can motivate pedagogues who may consider adapting and adopting Visual Dialogue for their own classrooms.

Using the project “Visual Dialogue on Fez” as an example, I developed a “more than verbal” approach that can engage peoples living aboard in a practice of “wondering subjectivity” (Parr 2005) about their experience of the city. In particular, a Visual Dialogue approach is well-suited for international courses as a means of fostering communication across cultural and individual differences. A key motivation to inspire university students to engage on similar creative approach is that it can be used later when working themselves as teachers in primary-school classrooms. This can also engage pupils in personal and participatory ways and that can suspend somewhat the teacher/student hierarchy of knowledge authority. Just by using a paper and some crayons.

One way to think about the goal of Visual Dialogue is that it fosters a state of intra-action for the student, whose drawing of the city generates fresh knowledge and understanding about the city through the visual dialogue with interlocutor and through the students’ own hand, in intra-action with the paper and the pencil. From a new materialism perspective, the drawing and the participant become “anew in its or her transformation process” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010: 53). As the student transforms the paper by drawing on it, and in return

the drawing transforms the students as she/he undergo an inner dialogue while performing the drawing.

Breaking with the dualistic position of human subject and material object, and bringing our attention to what might happen and diverge from our teaching plan, Lenz Taguchi asks: “How is it possible to teach without asking children or students about what they themselves think and bring into their play or learning events we are involving them in?” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010: 61).

By questioning and reformulating the experiences of the city using an intra-active approach, students are given the opportunity to explore non-traditional teaching tools that embrace embodied experience together with their student peers during their nomadic life-phase together in tertiary education. Visual Dialogue in such a setting gives students a case study of a process-oriented learning environment that embraces the unknown in a creative way of learning.

Conclusion

This paper describes an arts-based research approach I call “Visual Dialogue”, in which participants create drawings that express their experience of and feelings about a city they inhabit, with the intra-acting drawing process itself, and not just the finished product, an occasion for dialogue and discussion with at least one interlocutor. The interlocutor can be another student.

Such an approach might be well-suited for teacher training courses, particularly when international students are part of the class, as a means of fostering communication across cultural and individual differences. My attempt here is to share a way of working with students to reveal unconscious or unarticulated personal experiences of the city.

More broadly, Visual Dialogue gives university teachers hands-on experience with practices that can inspire student teachers to see the potential of art and crafts methods as an “intra-active pedagogy”, wherein the students can develop own self-understanding.

References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Comment vivre ensemble - Sur l'idiorrythmie*. Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France.
- Jamouchi, S. (2008). Her city. Video installation. Retrieved on February 2018, from: <http://du-store-verden.no/article.php?story=20080314165640134>
- Jamouchi, S. (2016). Visual Dialogue in Fez. Video. Retrieved on February 2018, from: <https://vimeo.com/182381950>
- Leavy, P. (2009). *Methods meets art. Arts-based research practice*. Ney York, London: The Guilford press.
- Lenz Taguchi, H. (2010). *Going beyond the theory/practice divide in early childhood education: Introducing an intra-active pedagogy*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press
- McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-Based research*. London : Jessica Kingsley Publisher.
- Parr, A (2005). *The Deleuze dictionary*. United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.
- Perec, G. (2000). *Espèces d'espaces*. Paris: Editions Galilée.
- Pink, S. (2006). *Doing visual ethnography*. Australia: RMIT University.
- Rehal, S. & Birgersson, L. (2006). Associative images as a communication tool to improve the dialogue between designers and end-users. *Hygiène et sécurité du travail – Cahiers de notes documentaire – 4^{ème} trimestre*, 205, 23-32.
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies. An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Sage publication Ltd.
- Spencer, Stephen. (2011). Mapping society: a 'sense of place'. In Spencer, Stephen (red.) *Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Awakening Visions*. (pp. 69-109). London and New York: Routledge.
- Spencer, Stephen. (2011). *Visualising identity*. In Spencer, Stephen (red.) *Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Awakening Visions*. (pp. 110-131). London and New York: Routledge.