What can an image tell? Challenges and benefits of using visual art as a research method to voice lived experiences of students and teachers

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ABSTRACT

As humans, we have the ability to use many forms of "language" to express our self and our experiences, where visual art, an image, is one. Accordingly, experiences can be described in many different ways. In this paper we describe the challenges and benefits of using visual art as a research method to voice lived experiences of students and teachers based on life-world phenomenology. We give three examples of the analysis of visual art works, such as photographs, lino prints, and drawings made by students and teachers, as a way to express their lived experiences of different phenomena. The conclusion is that there are limits with using visual art as the sole source of empirical data. We argue that such data has to be accompanied by oral or written comments to enhance credibility and rigor. A life-world phenomenological analysis of visual art and subsequent comments emphasizes openness and humility to participants' experiences as well as an all-inclusive understanding of a phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, views of human language have changed (Kress & van Leuven 2001). A broadened perspective of language—multimodality—is now part of everyday educational practice (Hurtig 2007), including the understanding that spoken or written language may not be enough to fully represent knowledge and experience. This broadened perspective of language has impacted on educational research, increasing the use of multimodal methods. The focus of this paper is to explore the use of visual art works, such as drawings, photographs, and lino prints combined with spoken or written language, as empirical data.

The multimodal view of language emphasizes the ability of humans to communicate in different modes. Humans are not solely able to express themselves through speech and writing, but also through still and motion images. Multimodality is also connected to learning—people learn through different "languages." Languages can, in this case, be considered as being spoken and written word, body language, and visual images. Different people favor different ways of expressing themselves (Alerby, 2003).

To understand multimodality, one must go back in history. In Western culture, monomodality has for quite a long time clearly and explicitly been present. The most valued genres of written texts, such as literary novels, academic texts, official documents, and various types of reports were almost exclusively produced without graphic images or illustrations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The visual arts have also been characterized by monomodality. Throughout history artists have predominantly used the same methods and materials—oil paintings on canvas. This homogenous stance has also been expressed by musicians in concerts, where uniform movement and clothing were commonly used. The theoretical and investigative disciplines that were developed to discuss art forms were also uniform and monomodal. There was one language for discussing visual art, another for conversing about music, yet another for studying written texts and so on. Each of these languages had its own method, assumptions, subject-specific vocabulary, and strengths and weaknesses (Kress & Leuwen, 2001).

In the multimodal era, visual art can facilitate exploration of the "silent" dimension of human experience and can therefore be viewed as a form of language because of its ability to communicate (van Manen, 1997). In addition, visual art may evoke reflections on human experiences (Alerby, 2003). The products of art can, in a sense, be seen as lived experiences that are transformed into transcended configurations (van Manen, 1990). Given this background, the aim of this article is to explore visual art as a research method which attempts to voice lived experiences of students and teachers. The theoretical framework used is based on the phenomenology of the life-world.

2. Theoretical and methodological considerations when voicing experiences through using visual art as research method

Every phenomenological study involving human interaction begins in lived experience (van Manen, 1997). The basis for lived experience is the living body, which is the conduit for human experiences. A person cannot step out of her or his body to fully experience the world through another person's being or perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). To get a deeper understanding of lived experiences, phenomenological life-world research explores situations in which humans are naturally engaged in the life-world. The ontological suppositions of the life-world are based on the statement that reality has many nuances, resulting in a pluralistic and integrative view of reality. Such a view regards the world as complex and consisting of a large number of different qualities that cannot be reduced to each other—resulting in an emphasis on "both and" instead of "either or." Given the notion that reality cannot be reduced to two separate qualities—mind and body—researchers have to develop inclusive methods to grasp the complexity of reality. To rely on pre-defined methodological procedures is not an optimal approach (Alerby, 2006). Given this, methodological creativity is neccessary (Bengtsson, 2001) and the goal of phenomenological life-world research is to gain "a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning of our everyday experiences" (van Manen, 1997 p. 9).

Voicing lived experiences can be interpreted as a form of "consultation", that is, listening to the opinions of research participants on matters concerning them (Roberts & Nash, 2009). In addition, voicing may imply that researchers invite participants to describe their experiences in different ways through the use of many forms of "language." Beyond verbal language, there is the unspeakable, which van Manen (1997) calls *epistemological silence* and Polanyi (1969) claims is a rich domain that constantly beckons us—a tacit langauge. A person who creates a visual art work is involved in shaping his or her lived experience. In addition, an object of art can be seen as a text (van Manen, 1997). This text does not consist of a verbal language, but nevertheless it is a language and it has its own grammar. As a consequence of this, visual art can be viewed as one methodological implement when attempting to grasp people's experiences concerning different phenomena around the world. Using visual art as empirical data has been adopted by several researchers and on different topics (see for

example Alerby 1998; Alerby & Brown, 2008; Aronsson & Andersson, 1996; Jonsson, Sarri & Alerby, 2012; Palmberg & Kuru, 1998; Wenestam & Wass, 1987).

2.1 Analysis of visual art as research data
In previous research studies based on the phenomenology of the life-world, we used different visual art works, for example, photograps, lino prints, and drawings made by students and teachers. For detailed information about each study see, Alerby 2003; Bergmark & Alerby 2010; Bergmark & Kostenius 2012; Westman, Alerby & Brown, forthcoming.

In this article we focus on the method of data analysis rather than the results per se of the respective studies. In these studies, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of the studied phenomena. They were asked to create an image depicting those experiences by using different types of visual art techniques. It is significant that the participants were told that it did not matter how skillful they were in making the image, since it was merely a means to elucidate their experiences.

In our studies referred to in this article, we used phenomenological life-world analysis as described by van Manen (1997) to analyze visual art work. In the phenomenological tradition, analysis can involve various procedures. The analysis should not be done according to pre-determined rules or stages (Bengtsson, 2001). Key aspects to keep in mind when analyzing data are openness and humility toward the studied phenomenon and the participants. Such an analysis focuses on interpretation and description to understand a phenomenon and to find themes—in other words, to elucidate the meaning of the experiences the participants portrayed. To use different "languages" during the data collection in our studies, the participants made oral and/or written comments on their visual art work. With respect to this phase, it is important to note that the essential aspect is the participants' *reflections of their experiences* when the visual art was made, rather than *what* they depicted (Alerby 2000, 2003). To get a general understanding, we viewed the visual art work made by the participants with openness, humility, and wonder. The images and the subsequent oral and/or written comments were considered as a whole.

According to the analytical procedure, the visual art works were analyzed repeatedly and thoroughly. Each image was viewed as a unit in which qualitative similarities and differences, in the form of different patterns, were noted in relation to the totality of the empirical data. To document our interpretations, we made a collective mind-map, grouping the meaning of the experiences as it emerged in each respective image. Based on the mind-map and earlier phases in the process of analysis, we formulated themes describing our understanding of the meaning of the images. The themes consist in turn of internal variations in the form of different aspects, which reflect the great variety of experiences within the respective themes. It is the different themes which signify the content of a phenomenon (van Manen 1997). In the last phase, we reviewed our interpretation of the visual art and related the findings to phenomenological philosophy and previous research.

In an attempt to explain the different phenomena, it is crucial to stress that individual experiences are not the focus per se, but rather a collective understanding of a given phenomenon. Although highlighted through examples of lived experiences, the analytic process strived for a holistic interpretation of the meaning of the visual art.

2.2 Practical examples of analysis of visual art
In the following section, we give three examples from our previous studies, of how we analyzed empirical data containing visual art, such as photograps, lino prints, and drawings. We choose to give these illustrations since they involve lived experiences of both students and teachers showing that this method can be used with different research participants. In addition, the examples represent a

variety of visual art works and research topics. The focus is on how we interpreted the meaning of individual representations and how each image was related to a broader theme. Thus, the samples highlight our reflective process when analyzing the data. For further information about the findings of the studies, we refer to respective study as referenced.

The first research study exemplified was based on photographs taken by students. The study was carried out in one grade six (21 students) and one grade seven (20 students) in two schools in Northern Sweden (Bergmark & Kostenius 2012). The students were given the following assignment: *Tell us about a situation during class that has been positive for you in your learning. Take digital photographs of something that symbolizes that positive experience.* Two classroom teachers collaborated with the researchers in formulating the exercise. Students worked in small groups of two to four persons. First they shared their personal experiences with the rest of the group, followed by a decision within the group on what positive experiences to present. Using digital cameras, the students took photographs symbolizing their chosen issues. They created Power Point presentations that depicted their reflections both visually and in writing. The visual art works were presented to the class in Power Point with students explaining why these experiences were positive for their education. Their classmates were invited to comment, ask questions, and offer their interpretation of the photographs and narratives. One of the student's photographs is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A student took this photograph to describe experiences of a positive learning situation in class.

In addition to taking the photograph in Figure 1, the student wrote: "With teachers close to you, you feel safe. If you need help with anything, you can always ask. The teacher comes when you raise your hand." Our interpretation of the meaning of the photograph and the student's written comments include feelings of being secure and supported in the classroom. This enhances learning as illustrated in the photograph, in which the student is engaged in the assignment at hand. The photograph also

emphasizes the importance of positive relations between teachers and students, as the boy depicted himself and the teacher in close proximity to each other. In summary, this photograph of a positive learning situation stresses the value of creating a positive learning environment through caring relationships. We included this photograph as part of a theme focusing on embracing each other in mutual support (Bergmark & Kostenius 2012).

In the second research study the empirical data consisted of lino prints Bergmark & Alerby 2010). A total of 25 students in grade eight in a school in Northern Sweden were given the assignment: *This is how I want and how I don't want to be treated by others. Express your reflections in the form of lino prints, red colour for positive and black for negative pictures.* After the students made their lino prints they exhibited their art works and gave oral comments on the motives behind the chosen aspects of their lino prints. In order to demonstrate the analysis process, we present one of the students' lino prints, depicting how the student does not want to be treated by others (Figure 2). The student gave the following oral comment in connection to the lino print: "A small character is kept out and feels inferior and totally unlike all the others. All characters lack faces and the large white figures seem to ignore the small one. The blurred parts signify their injured souls."
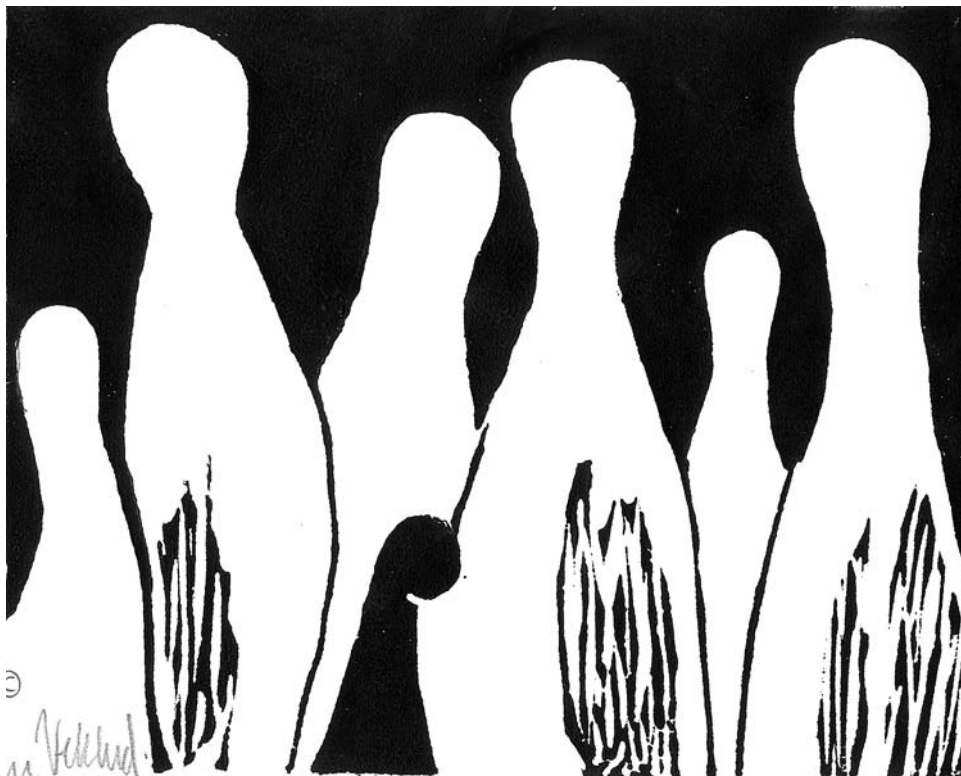

Figure 2. A lino-print made by a student in response to the statement, "How I don't want to be treated by others."

Our interpretation of the meaning of the lino print in Figure 2 is that it shows dualistic expressions of alienation vs togetherness, inferiority vs superiority, and exlusion vs inclusion. The picture indicates togetherness between the large figures, a constellation from which the little black figure is excluded. Therefore, the lino print at the same time also highlights alienation. The large figures without faces show anonymity and hostility toward the small person. The posture of the black figure underlines its overall inferiority and sadness. In summary, this picture of undesirable behavior between people

stresses the negative impact on feelings if people are mistreated, which in turn affects their well-being. This lino print was included in a theme involving factors which may hamper the well-being of students (Bergmark & Alerby 2010).

In the third research study exemplified, the empirical data collected were drawings made by teachers. A group of 21 teachers in Hongkong were given the opportunity to depict their experiences of being a teacher (Westman, Alerby & Brown, forthcoming). They were given the following assignment: *Reflect on your experiences of being a teacher. But instead of putting your reflections into words, make a drawing depicting what came to your mind*. In connection to producing the drawing, each teacher had the opportunity to give written and oral comments on the reflections they had depicted in the drawing. One of the teachers made the drawing shown in Figure 3 and commented in writing: "To be a teacher is to protect the students, to take care of them. A teacher has many eyes." Our interpretation of the meaning of the drawing and the comment is that the teacher emphasized the caring and protecting aspects of a teacher's work by literally embracing all the students depicted. The drawing also figuratively emphasizes the need for having many eyes in order to see and acknowledge all students. This can be interpreted as the teacher having primary responsibility for his/her students' well-being because the teacher is illustrated as the largest figure surrounding the students, thus keeping others out, as in a parent-child relationship.
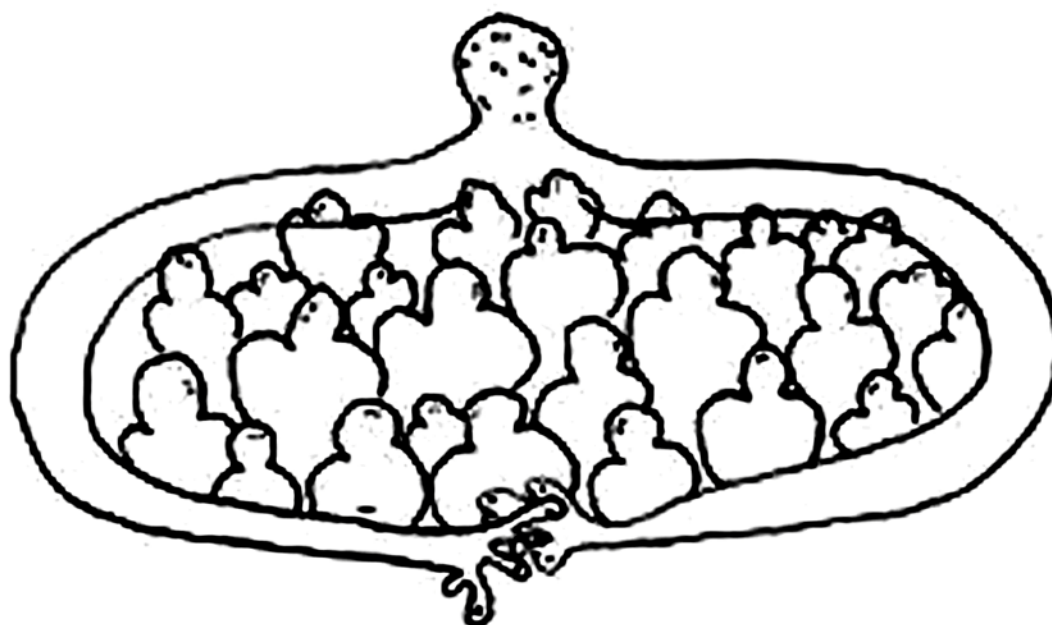

Figure 3. A teacher made this drawing when asked to depict the experience of being a teacher.

When all the teachers' drawings were analyzed, Figure 3 was placed in a theme involving teachers taking care of students in a protective manner (Westman, Alerby & Brown, forthcoming).

In summary, each image, together with the comments , were interpreted as described in the three examples above, emphasizing four steps in the data analysis: (i) searching for qualitative similarities and differences in the meaning of the image and comment, (ii) comparing the data, finding different patterns in all images and comments, (iii) creating a mind-map to document the interpretations, and (iv) formulating themes describing the understanding of the meaning of the images and comments. The analysis process can be described as passing through different phases of "reflectively

appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience" (van Manen, 1997, p. 77). This work is driven by a desire to understand and to make meaning.

The process of understanding lived experiences through visual art cannot fully lead to a total understanding of a phenomenon (Bengtsson, 2001). However, it involves description and interpretation which is as close as possible to the phenomenon itself. Voicing lived experiences through visual art can contribute to a personal and in-dept meaning of a phenomenon.

3. Discussion—challenges and possibilities with using visual art as a research method

One challenge when voicing lived experiences through the use of visual art is to make this kind of research rigorous and trustworthy as well as accepted by other researchers. When "giving voice" to the experiences and understandings of others in research studies, such as we have presented, one runs the risk of over-generalization in presenting experiences collectively (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). There is a potential danger of considering different voices in a single, unified way (Cook-Sather, 2006). Therefore, it is important to emphasize the complexity of the analysis, allowing different voices to be heard. This method has been criticized for leading to a "limited view of the very issues they seek to elicit and that analysis of such data is subjective and open to a variety of interpretations" (Sewell 2011, p.176). There are cases where visual art as a research method may not be fruitful. For example, in a quantitative large scale study, collecting and analysizing visual art data could be too time consuming and run the risk of not addressing the posed research question. On the other hand, there are a number of researchers who, along with us, stress the benefit of using visual art as long as the researchers are cognizant of methodological and ethical issues (cf. Luttrell, 2010; Sewell, 2011; Yates, 2010; Bergmark & Alerby 2010; Westman, Alerby & Brown forthcoming). Students and teachers possess knowledge that researchers can bring forward through finding common threads amid the diversity of voices, thus making a contribution to educational reform. To address the above challenge, we invited participants to share their experiences through different methods such as visual art and oral and/or written language. This approach gave opportunities for participants to express themselves in different ways. The purpose of using pluralistic methods is to get a broad, as opposed to a limited, perspective about a phenomenon. We also tried to ensure that this research method can "provide access to different meanings, interpretations and themes not possible through other methods" (Sewell 2011, p. 177). The examples of our analysis of different types of visual art included in this article show that oral and/or written comments provided an added dimension to the image and vice versa. One strength of this method is the unique interaction between the image and the words, something which cannot be achieved when relying on only visual, written or oral data. The rationale for using visual art combined with oral and/or written language in our research is based on ontological and methodological assumptions stemming from the phenomenology of life-world, which advocates an inclusive view of the person. This view results in pluralistic research methods, addressing the whole being: thoughts, emotions, and bodily expressions.

In order to further strengthen the credibility of visual art as research method, we could have used the opportunity to invite the participants into the data analysis, as the second author of this paper has done in a research study based on written reflection (Bergmark 2008). In the referred study, the students confirmed the researcher's interpretation, but also made the researcher aware of other aspects of importance to them. We argue that this procedure could also be applicable to studies involving visual art work.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have described the challenges and benefits of using visual art as a research method to voice lived experiences of students and teachers based on life-world phenomenology. The conclusion is that there are limits with using visual art as the sole source of empirical data. We argue that such data has to be accompanied by oral or written comments to enhance credibility and rigor. A life-world phenomenological analysis of visual art and subsequent comments emphasizes openness and humility to participants' experiences as well as an all-inclusive understanding of the phenomenon.

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