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Taylor & Francis Group

Social Work Education
The International Journal

ISSN: 0261-5479 (Print) 1470-1227 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cswe20

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To cite this article: Patricia Walton (2012) Beyond Talk and Text: An Expressive Visual Arts Method for Social Work Education, Social Work Education, 31:6, 724-741, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2012.695934

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.695934

Social Work Education
Vol. 31, No. 6, September 2012, pp. 724–741

Beyond Talk and Text: An Expressive Visual Arts Method for Social Work Education

Patricia Walton

As a social work lecturer, I use a visual arts method to encourage breadth and criticality in student reflections on professional communication. This non-textual approach has produced vivid insights into practice situations and has launched students into a deeper and more detailed level of theoretical analysis than tutors might have expected in the time available. It has worked particularly well for students who do not readily articulate practice experience as academic argument. This article describes the visual method used and discusses the outcomes, with examples of the work produced. It goes on to look at potential explanations for the effectiveness of the method and to consider the relevance of this arts-based thinking for social work. The analysis considers underpinning philosophy, professional development theories, research and debates around social work practice and education, and visual and sensory methods literature from social work and related disciplines. The question of relevance is discussed with particular reference to the review and reform of social work presently underway in England.

Keywords: Social Work; Communication; Art; Visual; Sensory; Experiential; Phenomenology; Critical Reflection

Introduction

Social work in the English administrative area of the UK does not enjoy high levels of public confidence, due in part to habitually negative media reporting. At the time of writing, a major reform programme is underway in England to improve both professional standards and public perceptions (HM Government, 2010; Munro, 2011). I introduced an expressive visual arts method into the teaching and assessment of social work communication skills with some trepidation. In this climate, artistic activity could

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ISSN 0261-5479 print/1470-1227 online
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.695934

easily be made to appear frivolous, trivialising or eccentric. There may be an assumption that the aim of arts work is emotional expression at the expense of analytic understanding. Moreover, communication skills are a keystone of social work expertise, essential to sound professional practice, and teaching time is limited. Therefore, like all educational methods, arts approaches must be efficient, purposeful and effective.

The method described in this paper has been successful from a tutor perspective and in strengthening academic performance. Students have produced vivid, multi-layered reflections and relatively sophisticated analyses, with some impressive achievements amongst less academically oriented students. The experience and outcomes have encouraged me to explore theoretical explanations for how this has worked, the possible relationships between the visual arts and social work, and the potential for further applications. This paper provides a brief introduction to arts-informed thinking in social work, followed by a description of the visual method I have used and the work produced. Finally, I locate the experience in a discussion of several areas of theory and propose further work.

Visual Methods in Social Work and Related Disciplines

The application of different types of arts, including visual methods, has burgeoned in fields related to social work in recent years. In professional fields, such as the health professions, community work, and education, they are used as techniques for practitioner development and as a means of promoting healing, personal growth, social inclusion and community action (Leclerc, 2006; Froggett, 2006, 2007; Cayton, 2007; de Lange *et al.*, 2008; Gray and Schubert, 2010). Academically, the 'sensory turn' in social research has introduced a new dimension to subject and method in a wide range of disciplines, including management studies, sociology, anthropology, social geography (Banks, 2001; Foster, 2007; Liebenberg, 2009; Pink, 2009; Mitchell, 2011). The potential of arts-related means of describing and disseminating findings in order to reach a wider audience is increasingly being exploited (Gergen and Jones, 2008). Completing the disciplinary circle, in the visual art world, representations of social, psychological or political themes have very often been an element of art (for contemporary examples, see the work of Alfredo Jaar, Marina Abramovic, Chris Offili, Regina José Galindo, Tracey Emin). Also noteworthy is the recent growth of a professional art specialism in participatory community arts.

In contrast to the richness and variety of arts applications in related fields, a literature search for references to visual and sensory methods in social work suggests that social work remains almost entirely fixed on talk and text in seeking to develop and express its understanding of itself. This should perhaps seem odd when a sustained strand of thinking in social work has characterised the profession as needing a wealth of intuition and creativity to respond to the infinite variety of circumstances with which it deals (England, 1986; Fook *et al.*, 1997; White *et al.*, 2006). Complementing this, a substantial body of work by Ferguson (2004, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b) argues the need for practitioners to attend to the mobile, sensory and embodied nature of practice situations. These conclusions have been strongly affirmed in the recent,

definitive, *Munro Review of Child Protection* (Munro, 2011). The methodological questions arising from such proposals are the everyday business of the creative arts, arguably pointing to the potential of arts-informed approaches for practitioner research and development.

There has been a slim but sustained thread of support for arts-oriented thinking in social work over recent decades, most often linked to the literary arts. Two trends have been identified as eclipsing a substantial recognition of an arts-informed dimension: first, the identification of social work as a social-science-based profession; second, the political prioritisation of managerial-bureaucratic processes over interactional, engaged social work. The latter has been extensively documented and debated in the social work literature (Parton, 2008), and finding ways to redress the balance was part of the commissioning brief for the *Munro Review* (Munro, 2011). The dominance of the social sciences in the theoretical underpinning of social work practice has been questioned less often. At an early stage, England (1986) challenged the emerging tendency to define social work in terms of social science, arguing that this could not provide a reliable base for the profession because it failed to address the inevitability of intuition and creativity as the necessary foundation of good practice. Blom (2009) highlights contemporary Nordic conceptualisations of social work as art, based on the improvisational nature of much practice activity. Beyond individual practice, a debate has arisen about the extent to which arts thinking has the potential to contribute not only to interpersonal work but also in radical paradigm development for social work (Gray and Webb, 2008, 2009; Healy, 2008; I. Ferguson, 2009). Summarising the views of contemporary social work theorists, Bell (2012) makes the case for a philosophical base which more closely accounts for social work's ontology by combining conventional forms of academic knowledge with embodied, subjective, participatory practice knowledge. Bell argues that a combination of science and arts thinking is needed to achieve this.

The focus of this paper is on the application of visual and other non-language-based approaches. Visual methods are not unknown in social work education and practice. Visual representation is often used as a way of communicating with service users who do not readily address difficult or complex issues in word-based forms; most often this will be children or people with intellectual impairments. Equally, for people who cannot read, or who do not speak or read English, visual methods may offer effective techniques for engagement. Audio and visual recording is common in professional development, to enable reflection and assessment of physical aspects of practice inaccessible in text-only accounts, for example, speech quality, facial expression, posture, movement and the interactional flow. Diagrams, tables and illustrations are all visual representations, with the graphics enhancing the accessibility and impact of informational content. However, these examples tend to be factual or objective representations, or are designed to be analysed against pre-determined categorical or conceptual frameworks. Somewhat in contrast, an 'expressive visual arts method' is intended, for the purposes of this discussion, to mean predominantly an exploration of subjective perceptions and interpretations, with free personal choice of content, medium and product.

As a starting point for discussing the place, purpose and implications of visual arts thinking in social work, I describe a simple arts-based method used to help social work students to comprehend and consider the complexities of using communication skills for social work purposes. Originated intuitively by the author, the exercise draws on students' practice placement experience, encouraging sensory and intuitive awareness of the factors at play, and removing the distraction of needing to shape impressions to fit theory.

Visualising Practice: The Method

The premise of this method is that, to arrive at effective communication practice, social work students need to develop an awareness of the subtle orchestration of thinking, feeling, action and context in professional encounters. The rationale for designing a module assignment which did not use a classic talk or text format was based on my teaching experience that few students readily achieve this level of discussion in academic assignments about practice. Moreover, whereas academically confident students may successfully move beyond acknowledged ground to research and write about complex or difficult practice issues, those who find more difficulty in articulating practice complexities as academic argument sometimes learn to restrict themselves to generic or anodyne accounts of their work. Finally, when faced with the disparities between the lived reality of social work and textbook theory, students of all abilities can be inclined to write defensively about their own practice and that of colleagues, in a spirit of justification rather than critical analysis. An expressive arts element was included in the assignment to counter these tendencies. The aim is to create a mental space for students to bring to consciousness the complexity of communicative encounters by initially decoupling this task from that of critically theorising practice.

In the first stage of the assignment each student chooses an interview or other professional encounter from their practice placement; preferably a situation in which statutory duties create significant power differences, with high stakes for both service users and workers. Students are asked to use their senses and intuition to identify the widest range of factors in the situation. In addition to service and practice information they are prompted to notice the material and atmospheric environment, including the sensory elements of the setting and the physical presence of participants; they are asked to be sensitive to social and emotional contexts and the different perceptions and expectations of participants, to register how roles and power play out in the situations and, crucially, to be aware of their sense of themselves in the situation. Students are specifically asked to resist theorising their observations during this stage, leaving them free to bring to light everything they sense to have had a bearing on the encounter, with as little pre-judgement as possible. Students will normally be taking an active part in the practice situation so it is not, formally speaking, an observation. However, the aims are similar to those described in the observation literature, for example to develop students' awareness of their subjective responses in practice situations (Le Riche, 2006) and to stimulate reflexivity and reflection about the power relations of professional encounters (Tanner, 1999). Moreover, there is evidence that such

activities result in deep critical learning, offsetting the deskilling impact of overly bureaucratic-managerial practice experience (Miller-Pietroni, 1998). Students have a period of between three and four weeks to make a visualisation of their chosen encounter. This can be a two-dimensional work, a collage or model. The limitations are practical: A2 is the maximum size for two-dimensional work and for the base-size of models. Exceptionally, a 'soundscape' was the chosen method of a student with visual impairment and three minutes worked well as a comparable output. It is not expected that the artwork will speak for itself and students write a 400-word descriptive commentary.

In the second stage, the work is brought together as an 'exhibition' and shared with the module group and module tutors. Everyone views and chats informally about the work for 45 minutes. The remainder of the day is a series of tutor-facilitated discussions with students in groups of five or six. Each student introduces the form and content of their visual work, followed by exploratory discussion of the situation represented. Practice themes are identified in these discussions, recorded by tutors as a cumulative list and circulated shortly afterwards.

In the third stage of the assignment, each student writes a 2,000-word theory paper. Here they consider their use of core communication skills in relation to the encounter and select two or three of the listed themes to research in some depth, using this knowledge to analyse aspects of the situation captured in their visual work. A relatively short essay is sufficient because students have already contextualised their analysis and are able to launch straight into the theoretical discussion. Finally, the artwork, commentary and theory paper are submitted for assessment as a composite submission. The submission is supported by a practice educator profile of the student's core communication skills in practice. The work is assessed using our standard matrix for social work assignments, covering understanding of the subject, use of literature, analytic quality, discursive structure and presentation. The work is internally moderated and externally examined in the usual way.

Visualising Practice: The Response

Evaluation of this approach is based on two cohorts of students, comprising 27 and 28 students who have completed this module. For the visualisation stage in year one, 24 two-dimensional, two three-dimensional and one 'soundscape' works were submitted. From the discussions of the work in small groups, the module tutors produced a list of 42 themes in the first year and grouped these for clarity. In year two there were 20 two-dimensional and eight three-dimensional works and the list of themes expanded to 75. The increase in the themes was a result of tutors being better attuned to the content of group discussions, and the thematic groupings devised by tutors in year one held equally for year two.

Based on an informal evaluation of the method, tutors have appraised the outcome against what they would have expected using conventional academic methods in the time available. Comments from colleagues external to the module have supported the positive appraisal by module tutors. It is not appropriate to discuss academic grading in

any detail but it is possible to say that a high proportion of top grades were awarded and that for several students this was significantly higher than their average score. While academic performance is not a measure of practice ability, a method that enables students to better express their practice awareness is a welcome development. This resonates with the literature on widening participation in higher education. In the terms used by Hockings *et al.* (2007), social work is a 'weakly framed' discipline, diffuse in its expectations and therefore more worrying for students without traditional academic training. Guest (2000) cites a higher reliance on intuitive thinking amongst students with non-traditional academic backgrounds as one cause for under-achievement in higher education. To engage students imaginatively and help them define the scope of the subject for themselves, writers often advocate bringing lived world material into teaching and assessment. For example, Errington (2011) describes the effectiveness of scenario-based learning, while Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) positively evaluate the results of close examination of practice experience and the involvement of service users. To help students with diverse academic backgrounds to develop skills in staged academic argument, Guest (2000) discusses the use of 'catalysts' as a basis for structuring debate. This, arguably, is one aspect of the artwork stage of the method described here.

The key aim of this paper is to theorise the perceived effectiveness of the visual art work in intensifying students' appreciation of practice situations. It appears from the work produced that the subjective, language-free starting point acts to heighten students' perceptual awareness, enabling them to identify the effects of finely defined factors in communicative encounters. The themes emerging in the work of the first two groups are summarised next, to demonstrate the volume and range of the observations. The complexity of each student's theoretical account develops as they combine two or three themes for analysis. Illustrative examples of the visual work are provided in Figures 1–4. There are some copyright limitations to presenting the full range of visual styles and in reproducing 'found' images and materials in this paper.

Student Observations

Students have described encounters with individuals, families, groups and local communities. Service users are from a wide mix of ages, ethnic groups, class affiliations and disability groups. Meetings have taken place in the private homes of service users or in agency settings such as care centres, clinics, schools, hospitals or police stations. Students have discovered that social workers must manage whatever they find. Students note that many challenges to engagement in social work practice are not anticipated in qualifying level communications literature. Table 1 shows the range and detail of the themes identified by students.

The graphic collage in Figure 1 captures a multi-disciplinary meeting with a detained patient and relative, where very little co-operative planning is taking place. The work describes an authoritarian manner on the part of the psychiatrist and low levels of participation by other participants. The exception is the social worker, who attempts to press for a discussion of pertinent issues. It is experienced as a conflict of values in joint work with colleagues and service users. The psychiatrist is depicted as

Figure 1 Multi-disciplinary Mental Health: A Stark Contrast of Values.

assertively disempowering, and insensitive to a degree that is presented as metaphorically violent. However, the absence of challenge from other professionals, placed in the visual foreground, is also presented as a significant factor in the failure of humanity in this situation. This too is expressed as a clash of values.

The model shown in Figure 2 uses craft materials and objects from traveller culture—paper flowers and lace. The flowers are constructed from materials such as maps and eviction notices. These materials represent issues needing to be understood and acknowledged in order for a professional to gain acceptance. The single flower conveys the student's position as an outsider in relation to the community, initially

Figure 2 Working with a Travelling Community: History, Culture and Trust.

Figure 3 Talking about Dementia: Don't Look Inside the Teapot!

excluded, but becoming accepted through communicating awareness and respect regarding culture, history and the self-protective strategies of the community.

The model in Figure 3 represents the student entering the service user world, in this case a well-ordered middle class home. The issue of dementia is evident in attempts to communicate but mention of it is carefully avoided, represented by the central teapot. The only colour is around the teacups and conveys the perspective and contained feelings of each participant. The lines track the flow of spoken communication, including barriers and omissions. The notes, initially tucked into the teacups, express the student's sense of the non-verbalised thoughts of each participant, with the governing injunction, to not look into the teapot, influencing everyone's thoughts and behaviour in different ways.

The abstract collage, of papers, paperfoils, fuzzy felt and heart stickers shown in Figure 4 expresses the student's experience of a first family visit, to give family support as part of statutory proceedings. The colours and textures are coded to represent a range of feelings and reactions. The left-hand side represents the parent's feelings and thoughts and the right-hand side those of the student. The circle in the middle is the interview, which begins to identify, contain and manage these elements. Both the scrutinised parent and the inexperienced student are portrayed as experiencing similar feelings—nervousness, hope, fear and love—but in different degrees. Only the parent has blue segments, which represent an element of desperation.

Figure 4 Initial Home Visit: Being a Young Student.

I have seen these and other works many times and I still find them authentic, moving and aesthetically compelling.

Discussion

My purpose here is to identify potential explanations for the apparent effectiveness of the visual-artistic method, not least in eliciting impressive work from students for whom traditional academic formats appear to be less enabling. Beyond that, a defined theoretical base will help to shape research and development plans. Promising themes and ideas have been found in several areas of the literature: primarily, philosophical and scientific theory dealing with the relationship between experience, thought and language, also experiential learning theory, together with research and debates around the nature of social work practice and education and, finally, arts, visual and sensory methods literature from social work and related disciplines. They are discussed in relation to each stage of the educational method described in this paper.

The Rationale for a Visual-Artistic Method

On reflection, my professional instinct in choosing a visual-artistic starting point, rather than a more conventional literary-technical approach, was rooted in phenomenological notions of experience, knowledge and sense-making. Here,

Table 1 Communication Practice in Social Work: Themes Identified by Students Using the Visual Method

Social Work Practice Context	***Equality, Diversity and Anti-oppressive Practice***
chaotic situations; distracting environments; unplanned encounters; service users in physical distress; multiple interlocking problems; involuntary service users; alienated communities; negative expectations of social worker involvement; power issues; ethics of role; transparency and discretion; trust; discomfort at intrusiveness; limited contact; service pressures; time constraints; constraints of task; pre-determined agendas; shifting roles.	non-verbal service users; unusual communication techniques; interpreters; cross cultural communication; own bi-lingual interviewing; conceptual and linguistic diversity; children; young people; psychotic elements; very withdrawn clients; immediate or chronic substance misuse; dementia; deafness; disability; different intellectual levels; negative and discriminatory co-workers; own prejudices; stigma.
Communication Process	***Communication Content***
brief timescales; negotiating long-term contact; fixed interview formats; family interviewing; team interviewing; group working; boundaries; status of 'advice'; awareness of progress through time; professional influence and fairness; information management.	complexity; enmeshed relationships; service user strategies; disclosure; shifting identity of some service users; visual materials; imagery and metaphor; use of memory; use of silence; client perception of visit; combining frankness and sensitivity; combining frankness and support; threats; service user histories, language, values and expectations; own professional views and judgements; service user resistance, alienation, distrust, negative world view, low self-esteem, low expectations, vulnerability, despair; hope, sense of future.
Being a Student	***Awareness and Use of Self***
feeling challenged by situations; feeling fraudulent in the face of major service user issues; nervousness; need to achieve professional 'calm'; need to develop confidence and competence; accepting and managing uncertainty.	emotional reactions; contrasts between service user experience, language, values, expectations and own; identifying with service user experience or problem; personal reaction to overwhelming service user problems; caution about prioritising personal satisfaction in 'helping'; engaging with humour and fun; making personal disclosure.

'knowing' is understood as a process of subjective and inter-subjective constructions of meaning, reached through experience in the encountered world, rather than implying the existence of a fixed, objective, 'truth' (Willis, 2004). Existential phenomenology remains a useful, though occasional, reference point for social work. Highlighting sensory and spatial aspects of practice in child protection work, Ferguson (2009, 2010b) refers to Merleau-Ponty's work on the concept of 'embodiment', the essential physical quality of lived experience. Thompson and Walsh (2012) use concepts from Heidegger and Sartre, including the fluidity and social shaping of individual identity, the chance nature of events, and the notion of ontological security, to explain the effects of trauma. Linguistic phenomenology, concerned with interpersonal knowing through the use of language, has been used as an analytical framework in several professional domains, for example psychotherapy (Elliot, 2008). Through a variety of theories of language and understanding, linguistic

phenomenology links with issues at the heart of the social work encounter—the extent to which thought can be conveyed through language and the extent to which the experience and meanings of others are knowable in this way. Cautionary reading is Thomas' (1997) critique of psychiatry's claim to a phenomenological method: while acknowledging the potential of phenomenological approaches for grasping mental health service users' experiences of hearing voices, Thomas argues that such approaches are not fully realisable where professional roles involve inherent imbalances of power. Also looking at professional applications, Blom (2009) theorises the use of deliberate 'unknowing' on the part of the social worker, as the necessary starting point for practice aimed at supporting personal change in partnership with service users. I believe this set of ideas indirectly informed the twin strategies of having students of communication immerse themselves as deeply as possible in the process of registering experience and of employing a visual approach. Together they attempt to counter the professional inclination to assign pre-conceived meanings, often overlooking the significance of institutional power and dominance.

The second major area of theory informing the rationale for visual or sensory work is the widely shared belief, discussed in the introduction, that social work practice involves a significant element of unconscious knowledge or thought. This is variously categorised as intuition, tacit knowledge, emotional intelligence or practice wisdom. Osmond (2005) has developed a useful framework to explain the range of social work knowledge types, accounting equally for the conscious and unconscious domains. Helpful in considering the nature of the unconscious aspects of social work thinking, and complementing the linguistic phenomenology perspective, is a large array of scientific work on the psychological and neurological basis of the relationship between thought and language (Finch, 2003). Debates rage on the nature of this relationship. Of interest here is the question of whether thought exists independently of language, as a deep pre-cultural mechanism, or whether it is language that brings thought into being, and if thought does exist without reference to language, how much conceptual complexity can be held in a non-linguistic form of thought (Carruthers and Boucher, 1998). Munro, arguing that social work needs to attend more closely to unconscious processes of knowledge and judgement, refers to a range of neuroscience work, including Thiele's finding that 'our sense organs collect between 200.000 and one million bits of information for every bit of information that enters our awareness' (Munro, 2011, p. 90). In this spirit, the development of techniques which help educators, supervisors and practitioners to recognise material collected at other than a conscious level, may be a useful aim for further work on visual-artistic methods.

The Artwork

The first stage of the visual arts method appears to work primarily as a technique for observation and reflection. It aims to heighten students' awareness of practice situations, in part by encouraging them to resist the temptation to order impressions in accordance with professional theory, and also by removing the need to prepare for language-based explanations at an early stage. It further appears that this approach

may reduce students' self-censorship because they are not being asked to offer a definitive account of their practice, or to defend themselves as aspiring social workers. In these circumstances, they have seemed more able to register impressions which are illogical or paradoxical, to tolerate uncertainty about the nature, relevance or meaning of some phenomena including the experience of other participants, and to more wholly acknowledge their own feelings, responses and reactions, including doubt, ambivalence, disapproval and discomfort. Loosely located in phenomenological thinking, this process also has much in common with techniques of 'mindfulness', a subjective approach to apprehending the world. Derived from eastern spiritual practices, mindfulness is increasingly popular in related disciplines and is gaining some academic support within social work (Lynn, 2010). Finally, visual work does not impose chronology as a major organising factor in the way that literary work does; this has allowed sensory data and context to take an equal place with process and narrative in students' perceptions of the situations presented.

In considering why this method of capturing practice should be productive, I have found it helpful to return to Kolb's influential treatise on experiential learning. Kolb (1984) presents experiential learning as a cyclical model, with two distinct dimensions. The first dimension Kolb calls 'prehension', comprising a dialectic relationship between apprehension and comprehension. Apprehension refers to the grasping of the 'tangible, felt qualities of immediate experience' (p. 41), a concrete level of thought, operating prior to and independently of language. Comprehension is the 'conceptual interpretation and symbolic representation' of experience (p. 41). Both are ways of picturing the world. The second dimension Kolb calls 'transformation', comprising a dialectic relationship between reflective and experimental ways of acting on the pictured experience to create working knowledge about the world. This is the clearest schematisation I have found to explain the operation of visualisation in the method described in this paper: arguably slowing down, by segmenting, the processes of noticing and conceptualising, and separating these from the process of transforming perceptions through reflection and experiment.

None of this is to suggest that the evidence of the senses is in any way incontestable. Laming (2009) and Munro (2011) reiterate messages from successive inquiries that social workers need to be cautious about the evidence presented to them in child protection contexts, where parents may have reasons to mislead them. Social workers are trained to maintain an open mind about information given verbally, but it seems that developing critical distance with regard to the evidence of the senses may be equally important, and possibly more difficult, since much sensory evidence is received and accepted subliminally. For example, the mother in a well-publicised serious case review in England (Local Safeguarding Children Board, Haringey, 2009) was reported as daubing the child's face with chocolate to hide bruising—an effective ploy, subtly communicating indulgence and enjoyment which, at an unconscious level, may be seamlessly associated with affection and well-being. 'Distance' is widely recognised as a necessary condition for maintaining an open mind in critical reflection (Gardner *et al.*, 2006; Bay and MacFarlane, 2011) and in reflection for practice (Schön, 1983). It may be that a visual-sensory approach is able to improve critical distance in recognising and considering sensory information.

Exhibiting the Work

This event was envisaged in entirely functional terms when designing the method, but it has produced unexpected benefits. On exhibition days there has been an atmosphere of excitement and the degree of effort has been impressive. Freed from inhibiting concerns with artistic merit, students have created striking and authentic pieces, both visually and in terms of their success in conveying the experiential and conceptual complexity of the encounters. Students have said they enjoyed the insight into a broad range of practice situations. In a research context, Liebenberg (2009) describes visual images as useful communication tools, not only in the reflective space of the making, but also in the sharing, which allows the creator and the audience to focus on issues of importance to the maker; Liebenberg suggests that this can help overcome differences of status and experience between participants. Foster (2007), using arts methods to enable and enrich feminist social research with disadvantaged women, reminds us that the pleasure of making and sharing art is a significant aspect of this type of inquiry. Social work is not greatly associated with sensory enjoyment, but valuing the aesthetic rewards of an artwork approach is not so different from how, as academics, we hope students will feel enriched by their immersion in literary work. Perhaps it could have helpful secondary benefits for a stressed profession and, with regard to potential future development, visual-artistic renditions of social work may be useful in the profession's enduring mission to educate the public about social work.

Theorising the Work

This paper has focussed on discussing the raw material produced by the visual approach and the extent to which it provides a basis for theorising the encounter. Two main effects of the art approach have become evident. First, students start their text-based analysis having already identified specific grounded themes. As a result, the theory papers avoid the pitfall of reciting overly generic textbook theory. Rather, each student is researching the nature and interplay of an individual set of phenomena and interests. Thus, the expressive visual method has had an intensifying effect on theoretical curiosity, leading to good use of specialist sources such as journal articles to drill down into theory and research around each student's identified concerns. Second, the method provides students with sufficient raw material to think critically rather than defensively about theories and models, both social work specific theories and those which have not been developed with social work practice conditions in mind.

Tutors working on this particular module are committed to avoiding a narrow clinical model in theorising social work communication. Gardner *et al.* (2006), researching development methods for effective critical reflection, advocate approaches that create '"open mindedness" and new possibilities for practice, research or teaching' (p. 228). It has been my experience that a visual-artistic approach is effective in identifying practice and theory tensions that warrant further examination; indeed, some students have gone on to research their chosen themes in more depth in subsequent academic work.

Personal Reflections

A number of apprehensions have emerged, however, in using this method. I originally devised the approach to help social work students to understand organisations' theory and practice, but adapting it for the crucial area of communication skills felt more perilous. In my own experience of statutory decision-making, outcomes for service users often depend heavily on the communicative sophistication of practitioners, and my greatest apprehension was that an arts approach risked students taking this less than seriously. This concern was entirely misplaced. Students may have their own apprehensions. Some are disconcerted by the prospect of expressing themselves using visual arts methods. Common concerns are inhibitions about conventional drawing ability and uncertainty about how to ensure the work is done well, with grades in mind. Sight of previous work can be reassuring, together with clarity that the criteria for assessment are as for other assignments: effort, depth and detail, reflection and criticality, and definitely not artistic ability. This clarification is equally useful for academic colleagues, who may feel uncertain about the examination criteria for work with an expressive visual component. There have been no difficulties with internal or external moderation in this case.

Finally, there is a question about cultural diversity. In analysing the content of the visual work it is easy to take for granted the *techniques* of representation. These include surreal, expressionist or symbolist imagery, and representations may be abstract or figurative. Collages and models use 'found' or deliberately constructed materials. In this, students are drawing on a range of popularised methods from over a century of Western visual art. Moreover, Western art has historically developed as one of its purposes the critique of social and political culture, as well as addressing ontological and psychological themes, all of which fits well with social work concerns. However, Western conventions should not be assumed. Artistic values vary geographically and over time, and visual art is a site of cultural curiosity and exchange. Large bodies of art aim for spiritual, animistic or iconic meaning and impact, and there may be distinctive technical preferences, both traditional and modern. Equally, art histories and influences may be contested. For example, visual methods may not be the medium of choice: Kholeif (2012), arguing that the Western art establishment has manufactured a reductionist ethnic account of contemporary Arab art, points out that 'Arab cultural expression has historically been linked to an oral tradition associated with poetry, folklore and, later … the development of the short story and the novel' (p. 6). The diversity question opens up wider possibilities for both substance and method in the use of arts approaches to illuminate professional life.

Conclusion

This paper has described and theorised a simple arts-based method in social work education. The longer-term purpose is to identify ways in which visual, sensory and arts methods might be developed for use in relation to social work more widely. I would suggest that in university-based social work education the potential is

boundless. All stakeholders favour theory being taught, as far as possible, in the light of practice realities and, as demonstrated here, arts approaches can readily invoke the complexity and sensory tone of practice situations, giving analysis a 'lived' edge. With regard to practice applications, there is a need to research the development of visual techniques in social work education to estimate to what extent they could be relied upon in agency settings; for example, in supporting practice and supervision by maximising practitioners' awareness in complex, chaotic and potentially misleading situations. The theory presented in this article suggests that assessment and supervision will naturally involve an element of visualisation; one challenge is to develop visual techniques to illuminate the process of comprehension. In social work research there is little evidence of visual and sensory research methods being used in studies directly concerned with professional social work, even though they are used extensively in allied areas. Current writing about the distinctive sensory world of practice and practitioners suggests that developing the methodological range of social work in this way would be productive.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to students from the MA Social Work programme at the University of York for agreeing to their work being used for education and research over the last two years. Particlular thanks to those students whose work is shown here and who wished to remain anonymous.

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