BOOK REVIEW

Picturing Research. Drawing as Visual Methodology

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The use of participatory visual methodologies has captured the attention of researchers in the social sciences as innovative approach: this book responds by identifying the need to widen the area of drawing, not only as visual methodology in itself, but also as a ‘research as intervention’ strategy (p.184). Indeed, the valuable use of drawing as methodology in this book emerges from a concern to “get at the inner world” (p.20) of children and adults especially when drawings can express what cannot be conveyed easily, if at all, in conventional language. The implications of this work in relation to social change are hugely significant along with its valuable contribution to education. The process of education is dynamic – a system characterized by constant change, activity or progress which has created the need not only for different strategies of teaching and learning, but also for different research methodologies that encourage social change. Picturing Research. Drawing as Visual Methodology recognises the intervention that drawings offer as well as the notion that drawings are a relatively unthreatening means of communication. An added benefit to making use of drawing as research method is that it leads to a reflective process in which participants have time to think about the issue at hand, and explore ideas related to this issue in order to make sense of their world.

The sixteen chapters are organised into two sections that reflect a double focus: ‘The Drawing’s the Thing: Critical Issues in the Use of Drawings in Social Science Research’ and ‘Illustrations from Practice: Drawing from Research’.

Mitchell, Theron, Smith and Stuart in their introductory chapter position themselves clearly as educators and researchers, speaking directly to practitioners who wish to explore significant social issues by making use of drawings which, according to Theron (p. 5), have the ability to “communicate complex messages in simple ways”. The editors take the reader on a fascinating journey explaining how each came to use drawings in her work. What is really useful is the acknowledgement of limitations and challenges—information beneficial to the novice-researcher.

The first section of Picturing Research presents to the reader a comprehensive and detailed, yet easily accessible description of the use of drawing as an approach to Visual Participatory Methodology. This book traces the use of drawing in qualitative social science research by starting with a critical commentary on the use of drawing as method, moving on to the innovative use of drawing as method for self-study. It then proceeds to address ethical issues, such as generating and interpreting drawings from, for example, a
positive African approach; the politics of working with children’s drawings in order to effect change in struggling communities; the use of children’s drawings to contribute to policy change across different sectors such as education and health; and the critical importance of analysing the drawing data in a participatory way.

Although the methodology might make the use of drawing seem simple and self-evident, one is reminded every so often by the authors that drawing “should not be romanticised” (p. 186). Drawings do not necessarily show what is visible: it is the invisible that needs to be uncovered, and this involves participatory analysis and perhaps, at times, third party analysis, too. The authors aptly address related concerns and questions that they have experienced in the use of the methodology, as well as critical issues they anticipate.

In Section two readers are invited to consider examples of educators and researchers working with drawings. Nine research-based case-studies are presented which illustrate the richness of data obtained and gathered from drawings. With the high incidence of HIV in South Africa it is clear that the authors engage with issues related to HIV and AIDS in the hope of assisting teachers, community health workers, and other stakeholders in effecting social change in communities. Although most chapters in this section focus on research in South African contexts, it also includes work from Rwanda, Lesotho and Canada.

The implications of what social change could mean can be found in all chapters in this section. Areas and contexts in which drawing as methodology can be applied are offered. These include an exploration of male street youth resilience, using drawing to explore and depict what street youth view as contributing factors to their resilience. The impact of drawing becomes clear when we take into consideration that street youth, or at-risk learners, are often “illiterate or have low levels of literacy” (p. 106). Drawing is also used to explore how female teachers reflect on and position themselves within sexuality education classrooms. Integrating HIV and AIDS into curricula is a critical aspect of a response to the epidemic and drawing is offered as a simple but provocative entry point into integrating HIV and AIDS into Mathematics education. Drawing is also positioned as a visual arts-based method which offers powerful possibilities in the area of HIV and AIDS, and in the context of teacher education and development. The notion that drawing could enable members of a community, for example community health care workers, HIV-positive children and migrant teenagers to be heard, is explored as contributing to critical thinking and knowledge transfer. For example, HIV-positive children become “activist artists” (p. 202) by participating in the creation of a storybook to reach out and teach their peers about HIV. The use of drawing offers the drawers/artists an opportunity to reveal their feelings, attitudes, beliefs and so on in a relatively simple low-cost way. It is however useful, if not essential, to elicit some textual or verbal explanation to accompany the drawing. It is the analysis of the drawings and the practical applications of using drawing in these different areas and in different ways that gives this section its strength.

This section also points to other genres of drawing such as cartoons and storyboarding. Using different genres does enable researchers to relinquish some control over the research process: *Picturing Research* stresses the role of the researcher in enabling participants to engage in the research process through effective communication and within supportive structures. If drawing as research method is managed effectively, it has a potentially great impact on the lives of participants and on members of the community.

This exciting and innovative book will prove invaluable to both novice and experienced researchers, teachers, teacher-educators and community healthcare workers who wish to use drawing as research methodology. It will also find a receptive audience amongst those who are interested in expanding the theory and practice of research: *Picturing Research* offers a fresh and productive vision of what research can be.