Using drawings to create a critical and collaborative learning space in the study of Irish politics

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Publications:

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Introduction

We believe that a politics education should seek to build a just society, while questioning assumptions embedded in theory and practice. This conceptualisation requires students to reflect critically on their world. In seeking to broaden students' perspectives and contribute to their development as 'critical beings' (Barnett, 1997), our aim is to challenge all perspectives, both prevailing wisdom and views opposed to it. This will enable students to critically assess the merits of each perspective, irrespective of its status. However, this requires overcoming an enduring bias in instructional pedagogies toward simplification (Dehler, Welsh and Lewis, 2004, 168), privileging propositional knowledge (Heron and Reason, 1997), and the perception that academics tend to possess a left-wing bias (Horowitz, 2006).

Our interest in the power of freehand drawing, as a teaching method that can stimulate a critical stance, arises from our wish to build our students' capacity to engage in, and with, critical thinking (see Donnelly and Hogan, 2013). Freehand drawing represents a visual elicitation technique that permits students to see that there are potentially multiple ways to understand, analyse and challenge any issue. The intention, with using this approach in an

introductory module to Irish Politics, was to create a learning environment wherein students are encouraged to become more active, critically reflexive learners. The activity involves the learner in a process of visually representing a personal, non-verbal interpretation of what they perceive Irish politics to be. While we have gathered over a thousand drawings across the years of using the approach in the classroom, for this PSAI teaching and learning specialist group event we presents a small sample, for illustrative purposes, of these learner-generated freehand drawings and how they were used to generate a collective – students and faculty – conceptualisation of Irish politics.

The paper proceeds with a brief discussion of the Irish political and economic context. We then consider the value of visual representation, followed by a section on the use of drawings in the context of critical pedagogy. After this, we outline our use of freehand drawing in the classroom, followed by a discussion on how the approach was employed within the space of the classroom to generate a critical and shared understanding of Irish politics. Thereafter, we discuss the pedagogical implications of our approach, before concluding with a discussion of the richness that comes from using drawing in the classroom.

The value of visual representation

Images are ubiquitous in everyday experience. Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes (2012) note that this is commensurate with the visual taking on a previously unmatched cultural centrality in modern societies. Indeed, as Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes (2012, 17) point out, such primacy affords visual representation a 'central role in promoting and facilitating the formation, reflection and inflection of what we "take for granted" about the world.' However, despite its pervasiveness, the visual is largely absent from the political science classroom.

Using visual techniques prompts a more dynamic exploration of a phenomenon and, in the process, challenges conventional wisdom (Parker, 2009). The visual allows learners

open up, express what may otherwise be uncomfortable (Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes, 2012), and surfaces hidden perspectives (O'Neill, 2008). It functions as 'a catalyst, helping them [learners] to articulate feelings that had been implicit and were hard to define' (Zuboff, 1988, 141), raises participants' voices through allowing them set the agenda and own the discussion (Warren, 2005), and creates a 'third space' (Parker, 2009) in the classroom.

It is in helping learners access this information, and sometimes even previously unrecognized insights, that visual methods are effective (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). Such methods enhance learners' capacity to make sense of things through the use of a 'whole brain approach to accessing information and understanding' the dynamics at play (Kearney and Hyle, 2004, 380). Drawings encourage active participation in the learning process and integration of visual with verbal data provides a useful form of data triangulation. Thus, 'visual instruments seem uniquely suited to situations where" a professor would rather not impose 'his or her cognitive framework prematurely' on students (Meyer, 1991, 232).

Freehand drawing and critical pedagogy

Arts based learning presents a more holistic way of comprehending the world, than is offered by 'the traditional tools of logic and rationality' (Page and Gaggiotti, 2012, 74) or what Heron and Reason (1997) refer to as propositional knowledge. Heron and Reason (1997, 280) offer an extended epistemology, arguing that a 'knower participates in the known, articulates a world, in at least four interdependent ways: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical.' Experiential knowing refers to 'direct encounter, face-to-face meeting' (Heron and Reason, 1997, 280-281). Presentational knowing, grounded in experiential knowing, 'clothes our experiential knowing of the world in the metaphors of aesthetic creation' (Heron and Reason, 1997, 281), such as drawing, painting, poetry, dance, and so on. Propositional knowing 'is knowledge by description of some energy, entity, person, place, process' and is

articulated in 'statements and theories that come with the mastery of concepts and classes that language bestows' (Heron and Reason, 1997, 281). Finally, practical knowing 'is knowing how to do something', and presupposes and completes the previous three forms of knowing (Heron and Reason, 1997, 281).

Freehand drawing helps us move away from concentrating on propositional knowing, which is privileged in the politics classroom, towards a potentially richer and more hands-on mode of knowing, and in so doing presenting a means for developing student engagement and learning. Indeed, Page and Gaggiotti (2012, 74) proffer that visual representation 'offers a relatively new medium for critical inquiry that accesses modalities of knowing that are sensory, aesthetic, affective, embodied and that cannot be reduced to the propositional.'

Therefore, the visual, as freehand drawing, can constitute part of a critical pedagogy and in the process generate critical thinking. Critical pedagogy is context specific and descriptive, in that it critically analyses the world in which we live (Monchinski, 2008, 2). Introducing critical pedagogy, through use of the visual, necessitates redefining the roles and responsibilities of faculty and students, requiring that faculty move from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side'. This is about engaging in a shared journey to attempt to understand the other out of mutual respect (Barnett, 1997, 55). Thus, our approach to critical pedagogy is to create a participative learning environment, where students engage with module content, while developing as critical beings.

The decentred classroom also creates a learning environment that encourages students to engage in critical commentary (Dehler, Welsh and Lewis, 2004), which can produce a more open and creative intellectual environment (Allison, Carr and Meldrum, 2012). Students move from conveying an understanding of extant theories to theorising their own experience within the context of the broad array of understandings to which they are exposed. When they problematise, students exhibit 'intentional learning, i.e., they activate prior knowledge, relate

old to new in reflective ways, reach conclusions, and assess those conclusions before settling upon them' (Dehler, Welsh and Lewis, 2004, 177), in the process developing as 'emancipated' learners.

A problem in Ireland has been a pervasive silence following the recent economic crisis. A failure to criticize contributes to acceptance of the status quo and the danger that mistakes might be repeated. Consequently, '[w]e do not want students to accept blindly what they are told; we expect them to challenge assumptions, conduct research, and form their own opinions' (Stepanovich, 2009, 725). Drawing on Barnett (1997, 111) we wish to offer students, through the use of freehand drawing, an educational experience that challenges them to develop their own critical stances. The use of freehand drawings, in affording students the space to develop a critical disposition, provides them with the opportunity to consider where their discipline comes from, how it is structured and what social functions it serves (Freire, 1971; Reynolds, 1999).

Creating freehand drawings

The drawings we engage with in our accompanying presentation were collected from an 'Introduction to Irish Politics' course that we have run every year since 2008 year, and is take by 220 students, divided into 4 classes of 55. At the start of the first class, we provided each student with an A4 sheet of paper, with instructions on one side stating: 'Through a drawing answer the following question: What is Irish Politics?'; the other said: 'Now, in your own words, describe/explain what you have drawn.'

Students could use whatever drawing instruments they had available and we had no prescriptions as to what they should draw. We gave them 15 minutes to create their drawings. We then asked them to turn the sheet over and address the instruction on the reverse – to describe/explain what they had drawn – for 10 minutes. After the drawings were produced,

we collected them, telling the students that we would use some of the drawings during our next class. Given time constraints (each class period lasted 50 minutes), we engaged in a process prior to the next class meeting to select a total of 12 drawings. First, we went through the drawings, individually, and selected 3 from each of the 4 classes that seemed to capture most of the perspectives represented in the drawings. Then, we met together to collectively decide the 3 drawings from each class that would form the basis for our second class meeting. In each class, we worked with the 9 selected drawings produced in the other 3 classes, such that no student would experience her or his drawing being discussed.

Our aim in the second session was to explore each drawing and develop a collective interpretation of what its creator was trying to tell us. To do this, we scanned in and anonymized each drawing for subsequent display in the classroom. During the second class meeting, for each drawing, we asked the students what they thought the drawing's author was trying to tell us. We used a flipchart to capture their insights, prompting them to elaborate on any assumptions they were seeing. We spent about 2 minutes per drawing, to keep the momentum going and the room energized, and affixed the flipchart sheets to the classroom wall after the discussion of each drawing. Then we got the students to quickly form into 9 groups of 6 and assigned each group a different drawing, with the instruction they had 4 minutes to use the collective insights noted on the flipchart sheet to write a short paragraph interpreting their assigned drawing. That done, a spokesperson read out her/his group's short paragraph, with the floor briefly then open to the entire class to accept the interpretation or suggest amendments prior to acceptance. In practice, few interpretations were amended. We concluded the session opening the floor to reflection/discussion, asking what the exercise told us about perspectives and assumptions relating to Irish politics, about what we pay attention to and ignore, and what we take for granted and fail to question.

As interpretation plays a part in divining meaning from images, the reporting of that interpretation involves thick description (Polgar & Thomas 2008, 248). Thus, we ended up with three brief paragraphs per drawing, along with what was captured on the flipchart sheets, all of which were broadly similar in their interpretations, with some nuances here and there. As the students who authored each drawing had already provided their own interpretations of their drawings, this process allows us to compare/contrast, and reflect on, the individual and collective interpretations.

Conclusion

Through freehand drawing, our students generated artefacts that spoke to them about Irish politics – as you will see from our accompanying presentation. In 'foregrounding the affective power of the visual artifacts' they produced, we see how, 'through their ambiguity, visuals open up complexity' and 'generate richer thinking and expression, otherwise curtailed by power relations and contextual custom' (Davison, McLean and Warren, 2012, 8). As Davison, McLean and Warren (2012. 8) note, '[w]e tend to think students are disinterested in reflection, but perhaps we are just asking them the wrong questions – in words instead of pictures.' Indeed, a 'performative approach to the visual', such as that offered by freehand drawing, 'explicitly invite[s] multiple and reflexive engagements with our own incomplete, open-ended and maybe paradoxical written performance in order to make audible the alternative readings and voices which we have made silent' (Steyaert, Marti and Michels, 2012, 49).

As there are significant differences in how we respond to textual and visual forms of representation, visual elicitation 'emphasizes the power of image in perceptive, interpretive and reflexive processes' (Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes, 2012, 17). In this manner, freehand drawing can be used to embody students' experience of Irish politics that is then

available for reflection and sense making by both themselves and others (Broussine, 2008). That they discuss the drawings as a group encourages interpretations from multiple perspectives and gives students and professors an opportunity to challenge theories/beliefs. Thus, all of the students in a class become involved in the process and not just those assertive students who tend to monopolise discussions. This approach can raise questions about what is being viewed and aids reflection on the wider social, institutional and political context in which we are embedded.

Using freehand drawing to engage in a dialectical exchange with students about Irish politics – to develop their ability for critical self-reflection – permits them to put into visuals a level of understanding they found difficult to say in words. The presentation of information visually can enable students to access unrecognised insights and make sense of complex issues by employing a whole brain approach to assessing information. Students, through freehand drawing and employing the higher order thinking that is integral to visualisation, can define their knowledge of a topic that is universally understandable and rich in complex content.

The images they produced show that the students absorbed a significant amount of knowledge and understanding of politics from the world around them. With the country in the midst of an economic crisis, it is unsurprising that many of the students' drawings contained strong elements of cynicism and ambivalence towards the political and business elites. In interpreting these drawings, we see that the students are capable of displaying visually a deep understanding of the Irish political economy.

Describing Irish politics pictorially forced the students to think about what is Irish politics at its essence. Through their drawings, they disaggregated the various elements that together constitute Irish politics and looked at a piece of each in detail. With Waltz (1979) defining theory as a picture that is mentally formed of a bounded realm (Corry, 2010), the

students were, through their drawings, creating their own theories of Irish politics. Thus, describing politics/political science pictorially constitutes an ideal exercise for students undertaking any kind of introduction to politics/political science courses.

The ultimate objective of such critical pedagogies should be to produce questioning citizens. Students should be developed not alone as capable of critical thinking in their future careers, but also as critical beings capable of self-reflection and willing to question widely held beliefs. This approach also challenges professors to reflect on their roles in the power structures in society, how they reproduce these, and, along with their students, it asks that they contest the dominant social structures.

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