Visual research methods in education

In between difference and indifference

Julianne Moss*
Deakin University

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to support critical and scholarly debates that relate to the increasing role of visual research in education, youth studies, sociology, and studies of mental health. Researching in fields where young people are central exposes many struggles, not least issues of how to represent students who end up on the margins. School disaffection intersects with curriculum practices. When threading together visual research methods and matters of curriculum studies, seduction can set in, and unintentionally curriculum research can become indifferent to difference, the counterpoint often sought by researchers. Some scholars may argue that this debate has been well rehearsed in the curriculum field; I, however, take the opposite view. The constraints of curriculum studies, issues of student disaffection and the exclusions of schooling – when analysed through the perspectives of visual research – trouble our research designs and understandings of data and therefore require more, not less, interrogation. Rethinking the intersection points between visual research methods (VRM) and visuality, a concept that is critical to cultural and visual studies, opens out new spaces in the field of curriculum studies and reframes the methodological decision-making process for researching issues that pertain to student disaffection.

Keywords: Curriculum, exclusion, photography, visual research methods, visuality, VRMs

* Corresponding author: julianne.moss@deakin.edu.au

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Introduction
The intended audiences for this paper are qualitative researchers and school practitioners interested in the many dimensions of disaffection, including broad curriculum issues. In recent years, researchers considering how they might adopt methods which might loosely be termed participatory or liberatory have discovered visual methods. However, despite the upsurge of interest in these methods and the appearance of more introductory texts on visual methods for the education and broader social science communities (Gubrium and Harper, 2013; Rose, 2012), some of the key principles of visual research have not translated to this new field.

Due to the constraints of the conventional academic genre, I have threaded into my argument a single, researcher-produced ‘street photographer’ image. I want to argue that digitized images are highly seductive, and that researchers who take up the visual should consider their role to include keeping visuality foremost in their minds as they think through their research.

As this argument refers to the use of visual research methods (VRM) in educational research, the approach that I take engages the reader in an intertextual reading.1 For some readers, intertextual reading is a new activity. Other readers, familiar with poststructural and ‘post-qualitative’ (Lather and St Pierre, 2013: 629) texts, will object to being led through the argument in a particular way. Definitional framing of any term is always contested. As this paper is for a general audience, I will offer definitions that are essential to the argument and the readability of the paper for researchers unfamiliar with the literature on curriculum studies and VRM.2

To sum up, the paper includes a number of parts: definitions, endnotes, visual and conventional narrative text and a reflexive author account supported by longitudinal, qualitative research on young Australians with ongoing health conditions. The paper, like others I have produced, is an intertextual argument (see also Moss, 2011).

Curriculum, in the widest sense, is a social story, and amounts to more than ‘the policies and the resources marching through the school gates to organize the practice of teaching’ (Fearnley-Sander et al., 2004: 217). Clough, over two decades ago, aligning with a reconceptualist view of curriculum (advanced over the past three decades in North America by William Doll (1993) and Bill Pinar (2011) and in Australia by Noel Gough (2012)), explained that understanding difference requires:

... the framing of problems in the whole context in which they are noticed; such a frame will recognise the relevance and aims and organisational structures of the particular
with images in our contemporary visual culture demands. Rose (2013) draws a working definition of visual culture from Sturken and Cartwright (2009: 3), and states that visual culture reflects:

- the shared practices of a group, community or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural and textual world of representations; and
- the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic communicative activities.

In this paper the reader will be doing the work of both reading and viewing objects of contemporary visual culture. Ultimately I connect this practice to educational research, urging researchers to be alert to complicit and potentially exclusionary research practices.

Figure 1: Mr Eraser, graffiti artist (unknown) Manchester, UK. (Digital photograph, J. Moss, 2011)
Mr Eraser: Taking images seriously

Street art is powerful. Graffiti artists evoke through their art forms a curiosity about and reframing of our social world. As an art form, graffiti undoubtedly raises issues of social change and works to disrupt existing hierarchies. Across the world these artistic avant-garde works have found places in neighbourhoods and cityscapes. In the city of Melbourne, Australia, where I work, these artists now contribute to tourism and their works are frequently viewed by organized daily tour visitors and independent travellers, who visit what are known as the ‘graffiti laneways’. Mr Eraser, the image intertext I present here, is rather nosy. The image is a piece of contemporary visual culture and is my symbol for being curious. The image was photographed in Manchester, UK, in 2011. Regrettably the original image has since been erased, hence my desire to put its visuality to work in a research text. When issues of difference and diversity are aligned with visual research methods, new methodological challenges for curriculum and educational researchers alike are introduced. As early as 2001, Gustavo Fischman pointed out that visual research was marginal in educational discourses: ‘The reliance on words and numbers among educational researchers and the general tendency of dismissing images is generalized across academic traditions, theoretical traditions, and research methods’ (Fischman, 2001: 28). In the social science community it is still considered that, when it comes to VRMs, social science researchers ‘are completely unaware of their existence or potential’ (Pauwels, 2011: 3).

Over the past decade, as noted in the introduction, curiosity about VRMs in the social sciences has grown exponentially. Rose, one of the early and continuing contributors to the field of visual research, advocates that the researcher who uses VRMs:

1. Takes images seriously ... it is very necessary to look carefully at visual images, and it is necessary to do so because they are not only reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects.
2. Thinks about social conditions and effects of visual objects ... Cultural practices like visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both these practices and their cultural meanings.
3. Considers your own way of looking at images. If ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific, then how you or I look is not natural or innocent.

(Rose, 2001: 15–16)
memo cards from the Archives Office of Tasmania and local historical associations. I documented the history and contributions of convict and colonial sculptors, stonemasons, carvers, and wax modellers. Some years after I had completed this work I was contacted by the archives branch of the State Library of Tasmania, as the editor of the volume was trying to make contact with me. The occasion was an invitation to the launch of the now-renowned *The Dictionary of Australian Artists* (Kerr, 1992).

Given the arguments that I am making in this paper, readers are probably looking for the connections with curriculum, visual methods and my research. In the next part of the paper I tease out the genealogy of how a standard academic volume comes to exist in the digital world and how, increasingly, my research has entered these spaces, linking together VRMs and visuality. In 2007 I was again contacted by members of another large Australian research team, seeking permission to include my entry on Theresa Walker as part of a revised edition of the dictionary, which now has some 7,878 biographies of Australian artists by 400 biographers, with a further 480 biographies currently in progress. My PhD research drew from my subsequent experiences as a practitioner, school leader and policy maker, and foregrounded the role of visual methods in policy research (Moss, 2003). In 1991 I was invited to teach at the University of Tasmania. Twenty-three years later, after spending nine of these years in a large, research-intensive university, and having now returned to the institution that nurtured my development as a researcher, I continue to research, review, and further the field of curriculum studies and issues of student disaffection by focusing on what is *between* difference and indifference when VRMs are used. What is the place of image as data in qualitative curriculum research? How are VRMs used in educational research? And what, if anything, is afforded to visuality (the noun from the adjective ‘visual’) by educational researchers? By moving between disciplinary spaces and practices I have come to experience and know more about research and research methods, developing an understanding that research methods have a politics and that their practices are always under erasure.

**Curriculum and visuality**

I understand curriculum to be more than the education content that is taught: from my life history account and the inclusion of Mr Eraser, such a disposition is almost a given. I remain curious and ‘nosy’ about conceptions and misconceptions of curriculum and its social construction, especially when issues of difference and diversity are problematized through visual research methods and data.
sources. Arguably, rather than merely reinventing what has gone before us the imperative for any researcher is to reach for methodological depth. Inspired by the anthropological tradition, and by critical, feminist, and poststructuralist critique of traditional ethnography (Moss, 2003; 2008; 2011), my work is characterized by an ethnographic intent. I draw on ‘thick description’ and the positioning of ‘post-qualitative’ (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013) and ‘post ontologies’ (Lather and St Pierre, 2013: 631). I have an enthusiasm for ethnography and embrace the perspective that argues we can no longer conceive of social groups as being within a culture that is clearly bounded, determined, and internally coherent.

I have also entered into the struggle to develop ethnographic methods that include visual and digital modes, prompted by an interaction with rapidly changing social contexts. Researchers, including practitioner researchers, who are interested in curriculum questions of exclusion are frequently moved and motivated by approaches that can evoke the intensity of issues such as bullying, racism, disability, marginalization, and gender, and likewise have been attracted to digital methods. Approaches which merely reproduce the balance of power relationships and use ‘voice’ are, however, no substitute for careful and reflexive interrogation of the ‘iconic and indexical powers of the visual’ (Pauwels, 2011: 4).

**A truncated methodological framework**

In this paper I am putting a truncated methodological framework to work. I have owned up to the origin and nature of how I came to visual social research, and suggested the significant interrelationships to be recognized across the fields of visuality and visual culture. Here I explain how photography and a critical disposition can be threaded together to re-focus efforts and better understand the status of the visual in curriculum and educational research. I do this by paying close attention to the unintended effects that may result from well-intentioned desires to engage with new technologies and, in particular, with participatory visual and digital research. Visual social anthropology is a key disciplinary field for researchers who are interested in visual methods and issues of exclusion. Marcus Banks, a visual social anthropologist, pointed out well over a decade ago that, whilst visual data has become of concern to the social sciences in two ways (first through visual records produced by researchers (examining pre-existing visual representations), and secondly in the form of visual documents produced by the participants under study (studying society by producing images)), nonetheless ‘this dichotomy between the observer and the observed has begun to collapse (as it has across the qualitative social sciences more generally)’, resulting in ‘a third kind of
visual record or more accurate representation [that] has emerged: the collaborative representation’ (Banks, 1995: n.p).

Increasing collaboration with those on the margins, and the recovery of lost subjects by locating the voices of the excluded, are often cited as justifications for the use of VRMs. The burgeoning interest in these methods, evidenced by the number of recent publications on the subject, could suggest that in the twenty-first century VRMs have enabled the intimate and honest democratization of the relationships between the researcher and researched. In the next part of the paper, whilst honouring the current enthusiasm and curiosity for visual research, I offer a cautionary tale.

**A cautionary tale**

To begin my cautionary tale, I draw on a large Australian longitudinal project, the Keeping Connected project, where I was a member of a large research team investigating the ongoing health conditions of young adolescents. To get started with a project, visual researchers typically have to decide how and what images will be generated over the project’s life. This usually involves decision-making based on the responses to five key questions:

- What images will be created and why?
- How will the images be produced?
- What form(s) will the images take?
- Where will the images be represented?
- How will ethical consent be obtained?

In the Keeping Connected project (Yates *et al.*, 2010), our awareness that the young people in the project paid great attention to image-making and to the vocabulary of the images became central to our understanding of their unique circumstances. At the start of the study, the young people were each given a camera and invited to take photographs that they felt would help provide insight into who they were. Participants discussed these photographs in multiple visits with the researcher over a three-year period. Subsequent interviews and the generation of visual material by participants focused on connections and changes associated with school, changes in their health condition, or changes within family and peer relationships. The three-year longitudinal study, involving the collection of data over time, was an invaluable way of situating the participants (and their health conditions) within the broader contexts of their ongoing lives and their interactions with family, friends, school, and community. The key questions that formed the backdrop to each round of visits to the participants’ homes were:
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- Who is significant to them (in general? In relation to school)?
- What is foregrounded in their identity (at different times during the project) – is it the event/illness/trauma? (Where) does this overwhelm other things? What changes over time? Are there patterns of difference in relation to identity between those presenting through accident or disability, and those presenting with chronic illness?
- What are they concerned about in relation to school? What might they miss (e.g. relationships, knowledge, certification)?
- When do connections/contact from school appear helpful and when not?
- How do they see the ways others relate to them?

(Yates et al., 2010: 17)

The analytical approaches to the qualitative (visual and narrative) data included thematic coding and attention to narrative form. Digital and video materials were coded as ‘narratives’ of each individual’s story, each with their own particular themes. Themes were elicited from the photos and the videos, taking into account the researchers’ ideas about the unconscious selection of approach by the participant as well as the more conscious selection they communicated to the interviewer. The obvious care taken by these young people in the production of still digital images, and the visual thinking they deployed, led the researchers to rethink their positions in respect to the wide range of ongoing health conditions represented in the study.

Images do not embody innocent practices and their production must be supported by understandings of how images are not simply realist tales that ‘other’ research subjects. Consider, for example, Mitchell’s (2005) point that the ‘life of images is not a private or individual matter. It is a social life ... [images] form a social collective that has a parallel existence to the social life of their human hosts, and to the worlds they represent’ (Mitchell, 2005: 93). I am suggesting that what the visual offers is ‘an invitation to rethink what theorizing is, to “picture theory” and “perform theory” as a visible, embodied, communal practice, not as the solitary introspection of a disembodied intelligence’ (Mitchell, 2005: 355). The ease and accessibility of low-cost equipment and production methods, and a desire to open interpretative possibilities for groups who find themselves positioned as the other, can create a seductive place of desire for researchers and funders who are interested in research impact, unless the complexity of both visuality and social research is honoured.

There are as many analytical approaches to visual data as there are to any other method, such as the interview. Visual methods, as the early history of their use within ethnography will tell us, can be used well or badly. Researchers who set out to design studies with visual data sources and marginalized groups in mind are, in my argument however, playing with both hazardous and conceptually challenging
methodological and theoretical practices. One danger of these combinations is a solipsistic gaze that is nothing more than a form of researcher domination. Qualitative researchers are text users. In recent years many practitioner researchers have become very interested in using the affordances of new technologies and the promise of VRMs. There is, however, a need to weigh up the respective forms of analysis that can occur when image and text are used together or alone.

For example, when photo elicitation is used, the analysis often focuses on the interview text alone, with a reckless disregard for the power of images, whether these are from researcher-selected or participant-generated sources. Images can and do stand alone as data in visually-based research. When images stand alone, both the researcher and the viewer can enter into differing relationships and ostensibly this is how the visual creates and constitutes difference. Differing paradigms can thus shape the qualitative mixed-method palette, but enabling such shaping requires researchers to create differing hues and mixes in their research design and throughout the research process. As a researcher, I continue to use the principles of visual arts-based practices. The essential elements of good design and designing are, however, now paired with an ongoing preoccupation with the question of what is, and what situates, good educational research.

Questions of curriculum that aim to focus on exclusions can, as we argued in the Keeping Connected project, resist realist ontologies and engage productively with the visuality of the texts. In this study, visual and interview data sources were intertwined into a narrative structure communicated by the research participants to the interviewer. However, this position came about only as the researchers problematized the situatedness of the participants (and their health conditions) and knew that researching ongoing health conditions required new kinds of evidence that used direct and indirect forms and ‘a humanistic method’ (Yates et al., 2010: 17). As the research team argued, the latter method ‘does not let the person and their pain and hopes and fears be reduced to some sort of technical guidelines and how to deal with things; you go on seeing the participants as people and the individual’ (Yates et al., 2010: 17).

The age of ‘big data’ (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013) is here to stay. Research understood through visuality is also part of the ‘big data’ phenomena. There is a lot of this research, and very often researchers are overwhelmed by how much visual data is generated in even the smallest project. Visual data and its very materiality, I argue, assists us to see beyond metanarratives, to view the smaller discursive fields where rhizomatic and zeugmatic exchanges between individuals
and assembled cultures take place as shifting, becoming and transiting bodies (Grosz, 2004).

Visual sources in the twenty-first century can work simultaneously, in multi-modal forms, but also ambiguously, and should therefore not be seen as some sort of convenient shortcut or proxy for something that is really real. Research using VRM and linked to visuality engages with non-hierarchical theorization; what Deleuze offers, in his *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, as:

the new rights of functionalism: no longer what it means, but how it works, how it functions. As if desire had nothing to say, but rather was the assemblage of tiny machines, *desiring machines*, always in a particular relation with big social machines and the technological machines.

(Deleuze, 2004: 243)

**Conclusion**

In our globalized worlds, digital and image-based sources are there for the taking. As curriculum researchers and practitioners our obligation is, however, not to take. Visual methods are evident in ethnography produced from around the late 1960s and 1970s. Qualitative researchers now recognize that visual methods exist under differing social and research conditions, and can speak back to some of the critiques directed at the early use of visual data. The terms ‘visualize’ and ‘visuality’ have become essential parts of the deliberation in the field now known as visual culture. Deepening our knowledge of visual culture and thinking through the language of visual forms are important parts of new understandings for research that aims to support the understanding of disaffection and marginalization.

Researchers intent on adopting methods that can be generated through arts-based, photographic, performance and collaborative ethnographic practices should be encouraged in their efforts. Limit-setting occurs when the very essence of visuality – the generative qualities of non-linear forms – are denied, and where the interpretative claims of visual thinking are ignored. These relationships, as Deleuze has pointed out, set up relational exchanges and flows between the social and technological machines. Mr Eraser, the unknown portrait created by the unknown street artist and represented as the single visual intertext in this paper, like many streets artists has left us a cultural legacy. Researchers in education, like other members of the wider social science community, ‘epitomize the visual culture that they also inhabit’ when they work with VRM (Rose, 2013: 17). To wonder how we might refine our research approaches in the future; to see social change, and to be troubled by it; to better understand the unconscious and conscious forms
of the visual, and what can be asked of this data in between the social and the technological and in between difference and indifference: these are new questions for educational researchers who want to honour the challenges of researching issues that pertain to students, curriculum, and disaffection.

Notes
1. Shirato and Webb (2004) provide a readily accessible explanation of intertextuality, and describe it as ‘the process of making sense of texts by reference to other texts, or to meanings that have already been made in other texts’ (Shirato and Webb, 2004: 196). Elaborating further they note that ‘Because no social practice can operate in isolation from its social context, any spoken, written or visual text will either connote or cite other texts, and by recalling known stories will propel our reading in a particular direction’ (ibid.).
2. I have adopted the term visual research methods (VRMs), as recent reviews of the literature (see Rose, 2013), indicate this term now has currency – but, like any definition, the term is not without contestation.
3. I have added quotation marks here to add emphasis, using the scare marks as a semiotic form to produce a barrier that illustrates containment.
4. See www.daaq.org.au/
5. A recent discussion and elaboration of the persistence of these issues can be found in Rose, 2013, pp. 4–8.
6. See Rose (2013) for a detailed account of researchers who have discussed the photo-elicitation method and where ‘visual methods researchers are uninterested in the “problems” posed by photos because they are more interested in the talk that photos prompt (Beilin, 2005: 61; see also Hodgetts et al., 2007; Jenkins et al., 2008; Radley, 2010). The consequence is that elicitation studies in particular tend to pay most attention to talk about images, rather than the images themselves’ (Rose, 2013: 13).
7. See Yates (2004) for an in-depth discussion of good educational research and what situates the constructions of educational research.

References

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