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What stick figures tell us about Irish politics: creating a critical and collaborative learning space

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This paper focuses upon the interpretation of freehand drawings produced by a small sample of 220 first-year students taking an Irish politics introductory module in response to the question, ‘What is Irish Politics?’ By sidestepping cognitive verbal-processing routes, through employing freehand drawing, we aim to create a critical and collaborative learning environment, where students develop their capacity for interpretation and critical self-reflection. This is because the freehand drawing technique, as part of a critical pedagogy, can generate a more critical and inclusive perspective, as visual representations permit us to comprehend the world differently, and understand how others also see the world. We feel that the drawings provide insights into how our youngest voters perceive their society and their place in it, and thus communicate to us their understanding of Irish politics.

Keywords: critical pedagogy; drawing; freehand; interpretation; politics; self-reflection

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 towards 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

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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, this paper 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.

Irish political economy context

Between 1988 and 2008 Ireland became one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with GDP growth consistently outperforming the European Union (EU) average. However, prosperity came to a jarring halt in 2008, precipitated by the global financial crisis, and was followed by the most severe economic crisis to hit the country in a generation, its effects being all the starker in the wake of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period of economic growth (O’Rourke and Hogan 2014). Thus, the students with whom we were engaging in the classroom came to college when Ireland was already 5 years into an economic crisis that saw the bursting of a property bubble, a banking crisis and a resultant sovereign debt crisis.

Trust in Irish business and government has taken a battering. In 2013, Edelman’s Trust Barometer showed that in Ireland just 44% of respondents trusted business and 32% trusted government (against a global average of 58% and 48%, respectively) (Edelman 2014). These figures for Ireland are a slight improvement on the findings from 3 years before (Edelman 2010). It is not surprising then that trust in the main institutions of Irish business and society lags behind international averages.

Lewis (2011) notes it took 2 years for the Irish public to fully appreciate the implications of the government’s 2008 decision to guarantee the debts of the country’s biggest banks. After joining the euro, Ireland could borrow money at lower interest rates than Germany, but by autumn 2010 bond yields were surpassing 6% (“Irish Bonds Hit Historic High as Yields Inch above 6%”, 2010). The result was that by late 2010, the country became subject to an EU-International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout (along with bilateral loans from the United Kingdom and Sweden) totalling €85 billion (O’Carroll 2010).

Thus, the collapse of the property sector and banking system resulted in a severe recession, the socialisation of vast private debts and the loss of economic sovereignty (O’Rourke and Hogan 2014). Ireland experienced a cumulative GDP decline of 21% between late 2007 and mid-2010, the largest compound decline of any industrial country in this period, while its primary fiscal balance shifted to a deficit of 12% in 2010 (Kinsella 2012, 224). Unemployment, which stood at just over 4% in 2006, peaked at 14.7% in 2012. However, unemployment amongst 15- to 24-year olds rose to 24.2% (MacAlear and Doorley 2011), while the young were emigrating at levels unseen since the 1980s and youth suicide was of increasing and grave concern (Leahy and Burgess 2012, 112).

The value of visual representation

Images are ubiquitous in everyday experience. Slutszkaya, Simpson, and Hughes (2012) note that this is commensurate with the visual taking on a previously unmatched cultural centrality in modern societies. Indeed, as Slutszkaya, 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 to open up and express what may otherwise be uncomfortable (Slutszkaya, 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 unrecognised 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 criticise 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 here were collected from an ‘Introduction to Irish Politics’ course taken in the first semester of the 2013 academic year by 220 students, divided into four 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 three from each

of the four classes that seemed to capture most of the perspectives represented in the drawings. Then, we met together to collectively decide the three drawings from each class that would form the basis for our second class meeting. In each class, we worked with the nine selected drawings produced in the other three 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 convey. To do this, we scanned in and anonymised 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 energised, and affixed the flipchart sheets to the classroom wall after the discussion of each drawing. Then we got the students to quickly form into nine groups of six 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 and 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.

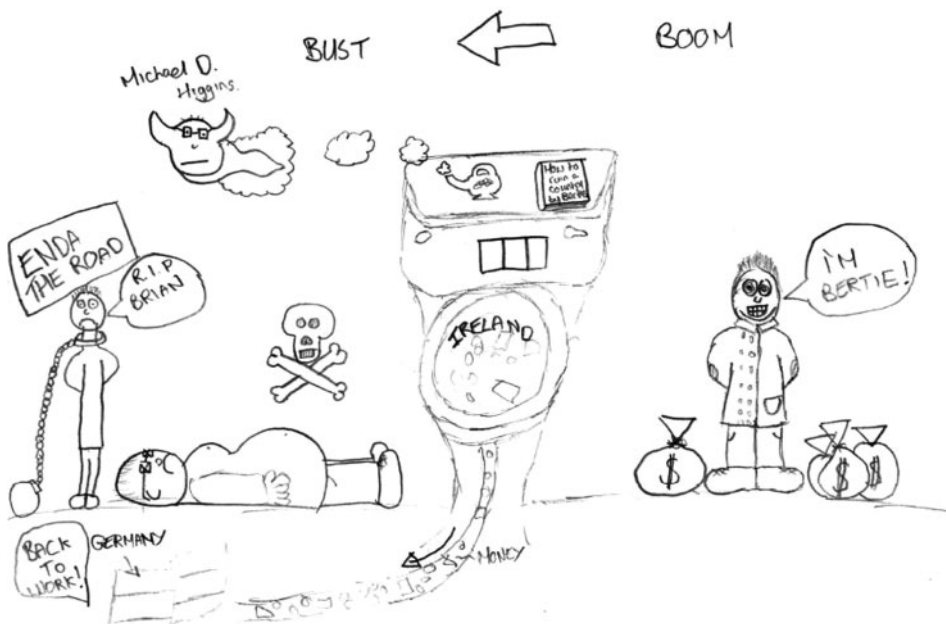
What the drawings tell us about Irish politics

All the drawings completed reflect the individual student's personal understanding and experiences. The students, in this instance, were active learners in a classroom environment and were seeking to provide a visual representation to illustrate their interpretation of what they believe Irish politics to be. In addition, the students provided some written words and/or explanations as to what their drawings were intended to represent, along with the collectively generated interpretations of those same drawings. This went some way towards bridging the potential gap between the individual's intended message and the collective readings. This constitutes an important addition to the data, as we are aware it is possible to both misinterpret and over-interpret drawings, as highlighted by Lewis and Lindsay (2000).

Each of the figures below is followed by our description of the drawing, the written narrative provided by the student who created it, which is intended to provide an explanation for their illustration and the collective interpretation of the drawing.

Figure 1*Our description*

This drawing is highly detailed. The picture shows a range of illustrations, with an arrow going from 'Boom to Bust', representative of the most recent economic cycle in Ireland. The centre depicts a large toilet (labelled 'Ireland'), where money is being flushed, but landing in Germany, with a slogan 'Back to Work'. There is a lamp (similar to Aladdin's lamp) atop the toilet, with a genie coming out labelled 'Michael D. Higgins' (President, November 2011 to present). To the left is a man with a ball and chain labelled 'Enda The Road' (referring to Enda Kenny, Prime Minister, 2011 to present, but also to the 'end of the road'). A speech bubble from Enda states 'RIP Brian', with an illustration of a man lying on the ground with a skull and cross bones overhead. According to the written notes from the student, this refers to Brian Cowen (Prime Minister, 2008–2011), who is still alive! However, as the collective interpretation process illustrated, this image could be taken as also referring to Brian Lenihan, Minister for Finance (2008–2011); who died in June 2011. The drawing continues with an illustration on the right of a man with bags of money, who claims to be 'Bertie' (a reference to Bertie Aherne, Prime Minister, 1997–2008).

*Student's narrative*

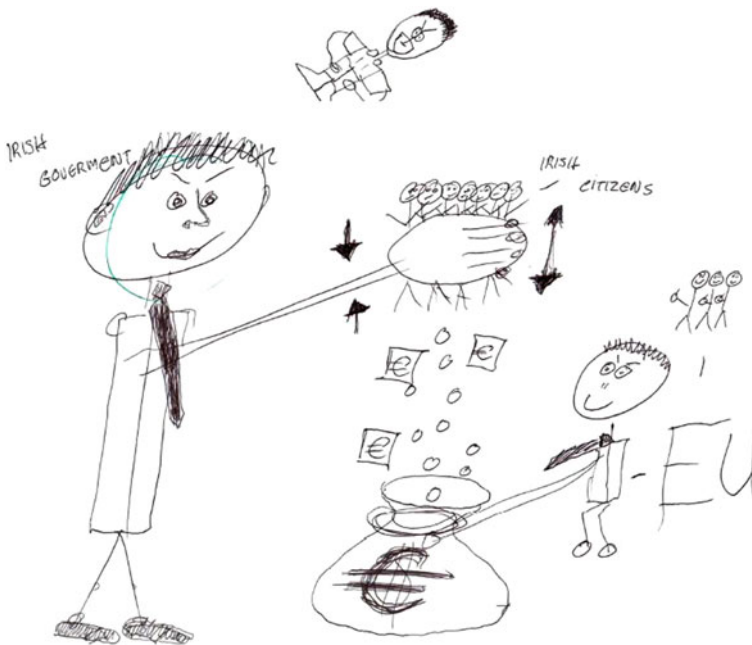
Bertie – Rich. Brian Cowan – Dead. Enda Kenny – Prisoner. Germany – in control. Ireland – in ruins. Michael D. – Spectator, no wishes left, no control.

Collective interpretation

This is a multi-layered storyboard of the student's understanding of Irish politics. The illustration contains a depth of feelings on the part of the student and much of the dialogue gives insight into the personal belief that the economy and politics are inextricably linked. The metaphor of the toilet and money being flushed down the drain towards Germany is an interesting insight into how this student sees Germany's influence on the Irish political economy.

Figure 2*Our description*

Figure 2 incorporates significant detail and depicts a large person (labelled 'Irish Government') clasping a number of individuals (labelled 'Irish citizens') in his hand, and shaking them in an upward and downward direction. Money is being shaken from the citizens, which lands in a large sack. This sack is being grasped by another large person (labelled 'EU'), though not as large as 'Irish Government'. At the edge of the drawing are three seemingly happy stick men, with money in their hands, who seem, unwittingly, to be heading towards a possible shakedown. Finally, at the top of the page (but not necessarily in the 'frame' of the drawing) is an illustration of a man.

*Student's narrative*

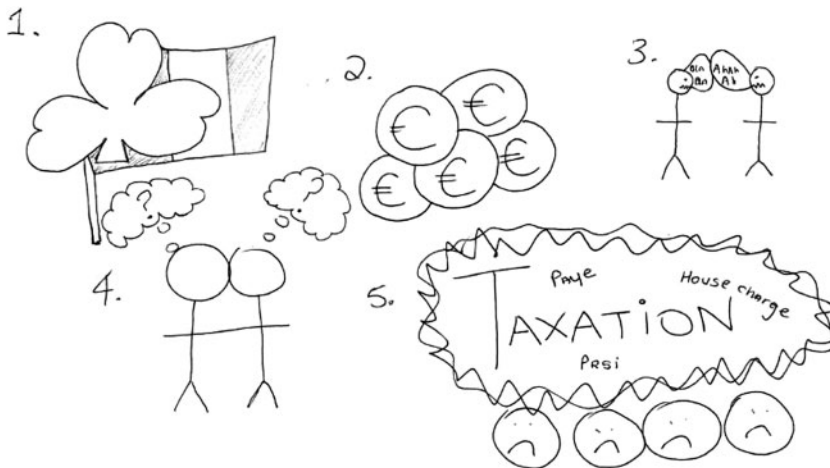
Irish government pillaging Irish citizens for every cent.

Collective interpretation

This drawing provides interesting insights into how the student views the relationship between Ireland and the EU. The enlarged image representing the Irish government stands in stark contrast to the belittled illustration representing the citizens being squeezed. Additionally, the representation of the EU as a middle-sized person and other smaller stick men as part of the EU is an interesting depiction.

Figure 3*Our description*

Figure 3 presents five different images in the student's answer to the question prompt. The first image presents a shamrock and national flag, the second presents euro coins, the third image depicts two people having a debate, the fourth shows two people thinking with questions in their thought clouds and the final image shows four unhappy faces under a cloud of taxation.

*Student's narrative*

- (1) Represents Ireland's image in the media and at public events.
- (2) Represents money, need help from the euro, part of Europe, free trade, etc.
- (3) Debate on different topics to come up with solutions.
- (4) Make decisions.
- (5) Taxation and a lot of unhappy Irish people. Tax on everything.

Collective interpretation

The public image of Ireland and the euro coins are interesting in the context of the question posed. The third and fourth images, whereby people are debating, asking questions and seeking consensus are useful for gaining an insight into the student's view

of Irish politicians. The final image of unhappy people under a cloud of taxes depicts a stark scene where the state places an increasing burden upon its citizens.

Figure 4

Our description

Figure 4 provides a clear image of a politician, closed doors, money and a polling box. The figure in the image is declaring: 'I want your moneeey!'



Student's narrative

Politicians: only want your money. Closed doors: secrets and LIES. Money. Voting.

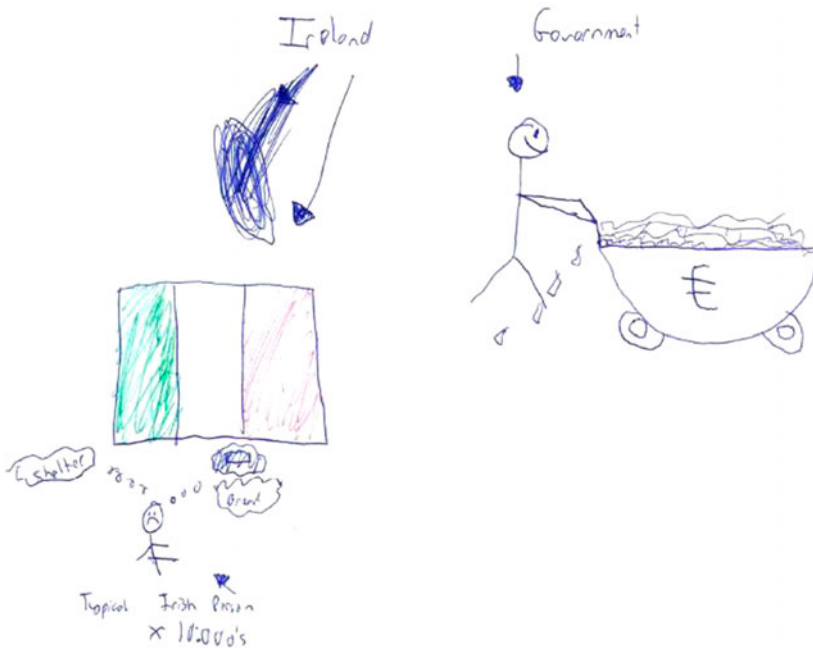
Collective interpretation

The politician's speech bubble – 'I want your moneeey!' – is a declaration rather than a request. Why they want this money is unclear. The closed doors illustrate how the student considers transactions to be taking place with an implied lack of openness, transparency and accountability. The images of money and the ballot box could represent a link between the scarcity of money in the economy and the most recent election, in 2011. There is also a more sinister suggestion: money buying political influence.

Figure 5

Our description

Figure 5 presents images that include the Irish flag and a person depicted with two thought bubbles containing 'shelter' and 'bread'. There is a note underneath the image with an arrow and the statement that the image represents tens of thousands of Irish people. The government is depicted as a man pushing a wheelbarrow full of cash.



Student's narrative

Irish politics is about how the government 'help' our country and innocent Irish people are craving food, water, shelter, etc., whilst the government waste wheelbarrows of workers' earned money.

Collective interpretation

The images provide a clear representation of what the student intended as their message. The accompanying written narrative clarifies that the student believes the government is wasting money while citizens are in need of food and shelter.

Figure 6

Our description

Figure 6 presents a picture of a politician with a speech bubble saying 'I don't know', along with four other speech bubbles, each one containing a different question: 'why did you increase college fees?'; 'why is education suffering?'; 'what about social welfare?' and 'why did I lose my pension?'

Student's narrative

This is an illustration of an endless story of questions to our political leaders with no answers in return.



Collective interpretation

The image is giving the message that there are numerous serious questions being directed to our politicians, but they have no answers. The questions are being put by people off to the sides of the drawing – representing the faceless masses impacted by the economic crisis.

Figure 7

Our description

Figure 7 depicts a large person with a donation box and a smaller person who is crying and reaching out for assistance or a donation.



Student's narrative

Government (rich people) taking poor peoples' money through different laws.

Collective interpretation

The image represents the government (the large person) holding a box of money and the other person, possibly on their knees, putting money into the box – a reversal of the traditional idea of the poor begging for money.

The pedagogical implications

We create, through the use of drawings, their interpretation, and in class discussion, a learning environment where we are all on the same epistemological ground (Raab 1997). Such an environment can generate a more sophisticated understanding of the world (Dehler, Welsh, and Lewis 2004), where students not only develop disciplinary competence but also can 'challenge prevailing worldviews and assumptions' (Smith 2003, 21).

While the students' interpretation of their own drawings was oftentimes simplistic and superficial, when we pushed them in their thinking during the second class meeting to interpret the drawings of others, they began to identify and tentatively question their own and others' assumptions. In this manner, through discursive interaction, the use of drawings opens up complexity and creates the potential for richer thinking and expression (Davison, McLean, and Warren 2012, 8). Freehand drawing, along with image interpretation and discussion, can be used to encourage reflexive engagement to generate alternative perspectives. The use of drawings, in enabling students to express visually what may be difficult to verbalise, allows us to engage in a dialectical exchange with them wherein we can complicate their understanding and develop their capacity for critical self-reflection.

From taking part in this process, the students found that they possessed a good basic understanding of what was happening in Irish politics, despite never having taken courses on the subject. They were able to recognise that they had absorbed an understanding from the world around them and through the media. In addition, they came to appreciate that by collaborating in critically assessing each other's drawings, they were able to identify many aspects of, and nuances in, their understanding of politics.

The students recognised that they held negative views of Irish politics and of the political elite. But, for a country recovering from serious economic crisis, an engaged citizenry capable of analysing past mistakes, and learning from them, is imperative. We feel that this approach, in encouraging students to reflect critically, contributes to developing the kind of reflective citizenry vital for a flourishing, transparent and accountable democracy. It also overcomes the enduring bias in instructional pedagogies towards over-simplification (Dehler, Welsh, and Lewis 2004, 168) and the privileging of propositional knowledge (Heron and Reason 1997), as it permits students to see that there are multiple ways to understand, challenge and scrutinise issues. Our employment of freehand drawing, therefore, is intended to meet the calls by Bartunek, Gordon, and Weathersby (1983) for 'developing complicated understanding' and by Dehler, Welsh, and Lewis (2004) for 'creating richer complexities' in critical thinking that serve to question what is presented as 'the one true way' (Stepanovich 2009, 726).

Conclusion

Through freehand drawing, our students generated artefacts that spoke to them about Irish politics. 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).

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 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 express with 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 contemporary Irish politics, at its essence, for them. 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.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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