

# Visual media and facilitating student learning

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This paper discusses some of the visual media I have used with Foundation Year and other students to facilitate their learning. “Visual media” are taken to mean student drawings, photographs, and three-dimensional modelling, in a variety of subject areas, but centring around study skills. Links to further information are provided wherever possible, and I would be happy to discuss any of these practices further in person or by email. There is little here that is original, and I would benefit from learning more about what you run in your own classrooms.

Why use techniques such as drawing, photography, and modelling to support Foundation Year learning? To begin with relatively straightforward reasons, there is the obvious argument about every student group presenting a range of **learning styles**, and the consequent benefits of providing information and activities for students in different ways. Equally obviously, using pictures and encouraging students to draw their ideas makes learning and teaching **more engaging**, and provides variety in classroom work. Getting slightly more sophisticated, using non-verbal forms for the expression of ideas places the emphasis for students on the practice of **communication**, rather than the narrow technique of using “academically appropriate” words. It encourages students to come at ideas from different perspectives; and indeed, can make it more obvious than a formally structured academic text that different perspectives on knowledge are always possible. Finally, visual communication can offer **safety** to new students, providing a bridge between their ideas and the classroom discourse that doesn’t place a great emphasis on their fluency in academic English. We will all be familiar with the arguments about academic literacy, and developing practices of being a student (Lea & Street 1998; Northedge 2003a, 2003b); and visual methods can provide a playful, creative, holistic way in for students early on in their journeys of academic enculturation.

What does this look like in practice? I'll outline here three visual methods I regularly use, and explain some of the thinking behind them. The first is **movie posters**: asking students to summarise an experience, often a module or an area of study, by creating a movie poster.<sup>1</sup> They usually work in groups, drawing on flipchart paper; and the time limit is quite generous, to allow space for discussion and experimentation. The poster could be an advert for the movie, or a single still, or individual scenes: stickmen are regular features, as are, more often than one might like, horror films. As with all these exercises, it's made clear that the quality of the ideas, not the drawing, is what matters; and a certain staginess is encouraged: student exaggerating their ideas or experiences is often a good way of highlighting what is actually important. My perspective is that this exercise works because it allows students to pool their knowledge in a safe, creative way, and to have some fun with "the truth" as they see it. Turning their experiences into a Hollywood narrative valorises and sums up their experience at the same time as treating it with a little humour, and an important part of the exercise is sharing results; often, one group will see things in another's drawing that the artists hadn't intended or didn't observe.

Another technique I regularly use is the creation of **online cartoons**. There's a great website for this - <http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/> - and it is a surprisingly rich task.<sup>2</sup> Students have three or four panels, a dozen characters each with half a dozen expressions or attitudes, and space for text to communicate their ideas. This has worked well asking students to summarise an essay or presentation as part of the planning process, and is a much more engaging and fun way to get students to highlight what is most important. It also provides an obvious bridge in the planning process for discussing the story of an essay, and encouraging them to think about how they will

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<sup>1</sup> I came across this idea working with my colleague Andrew Cox in the School of Information, although, as often with these things, he tells me I now use it in a different way to him.

<sup>2</sup> Credit here goes to Paul Wigfield, a former colleague in Learning and Teaching Services, who showed me this and many other websites.

structure the information. The technology is extremely easy to use, and in my experience, works best somewhat later in the module once students have grasped the importance of planning their work and considering the reader.

Finally, a way of working very close to my heart is using **Lego**.<sup>3</sup> The essence of the method is realising abstract concepts and connections, and encouraging students manifest their ideas in more creative forms. First of all, you need quite a lot of Lego, which doesn't come to cheap to give participants enough choice. Secondly, you need to respond to initial reactions to using Lego – some students are delighted and want immediately to build cars and houses; others are very sceptical, and perhaps see the practice as beneath them. In my experience, what works well is a series of short, fast, warm-up tasks – asking them to build something beginning with “C” , or something they'd find on a farm, to a strict time-limit. Once participants are used to working with the materials, and have seen what other people have done, then they are often looser, more creative, and more willing to respond. You can then move on to the main task – perhaps asking them to model what they see the social sciences as looking like, or to explain the university application process. This can be done individually or in small groups, and, as ever, the feedback is just as important as the process. Archiving the work through photos (as I do here) is important, as is allowing participants to dismantle their own models. It's nice to come away from a session of academic learning having made something concrete; and even nicer to work with metaphors about them constructing and reconstructing their thoughts (and themselves?) as their studies go on.

This paper has given a taster of some of the visual ways in which I work, with Foundation Programme students and others; and there are doubtless continuities not just with your own practices, but with the emerging field of qualitative research (Denzin 1997; Gauntlett 2008a, 2008b; Jackson 2007;

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<sup>3</sup> Professor David Gauntlett is an inspiration here, using Lego as a form of inquiry (see bibliography); although the direct connection for me is through my Nan, and the space she created to play on Sunday afternoons.

Jones 2006; Richardson 1997). In this area, it is firmly established that human experience cannot be summed up alone in words and numbers, and this is a lesson we would do well to remember, and to model to our learners. With so much emotional energy for new, non-traditional students around academic language and writing, introducing bridging measures such as visual communication are important for facilitating learning, and balancing the technique of communication with the discipline of writing. In this way, we best prepare our students as competent, confident, articulate, and creative communicators of ideas.

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The Prezi used to illustrate this presentation is available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/5t5kcke>

## “Arts and Social Sciences”: The movie

A Hollywood producer's been on the phone, saying he wants to make a movie about this module. The trouble is, he's got no script, no cast, and generally no ideas. Can you help?

Working in pairs, use the flipchart paper and pens to create something to do with a movie of this module. It might be a **movie poster**, or **one or more scenes from the film**, or a **plot outline**, or **drawings of the actors** – whatever you want to do. It could reflect individual sessions within the module, or your development as a teacher (or teachers) throughout the module – the personal journeys that you've made. So long as it captures something shared between the two of you relating to your experiences of this module, it'll be fine.

**The quality of the drawing really doesn't matter.** The intention is to get you thinking about your experiences of this module in a creative way, exploring some of your ideas within your pair, and within the group as a whole.

Once we've all finished our drawings, we'll share them with the group and explain what is going on. We will then have a discussion about the different kinds of experience represented, and what they might indicate about the programme as a whole.