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Time to play: My reflections on pictographic prompts and their potential use as a creative and educational tool

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Abstract

This article presents the work that led to the validation of my belief in playful and visual ways to facilitate learning. I use visual prompts because I believe they enable students to show their creativity and embodied knowledge. As an artist and educator, I have found that a seemingly light-hearted approach to teaching can promote creative educational experiences for both students and me. It also allows for in-depth learning and a sense of well-being. In this article, I focus on a workshop held at the Durban University of Technology in August, 2009 and describe the course of the day. I will critically reflect on how visual tools enabled the students to draw upon, and successfully demonstrate, their deeper learning in an intuitive way.

Keywords: Creativity; Education; Visual Teaching Tool; Narratives; Pictographs

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Introduction

As an educator, I have conceptualised and designed visual images as creative educational prompts. The images are in black and white and are reproduced on cards seven by seven centimetres in size. I conceptualised and developed the cards as visual stimuli to encourage people to tell stories and to support my own narratives and painting practice. The images are simplified and abstracted so that one sees a basic but essentially recognisable silhouette. I have named these cards PicTopic , a trade name I have copyrighted. PicTopics are used to initiate imaginative demonstrations of students' curricular and embodied learning. In my fifteen years' experience, I have been aware of the connection between playing, creativity and well-being and my approach to my painting practice as well as in my teaching. I have noticed that when I approach my teaching with an element of playfulness the responses and creativity of the students improve.

The epistemological assumptions underpinning the work are interpretive with post-modern overtones. I am “emphatically and subjectively immersed” in my research (Maree, 2011, p. 33) and draw on the living theory genre of action research (McNiff, 2002; Whitehead, 2005), narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005; Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008), and visual methodologies (Mitchell, 2008).

I first tried out my PicTopic cards at the artSpace Gallery in April 2009. I was exhibiting a body of paintings that had pictographic imagery spray-painted into the compositions as part of my storytelling technique. At this early stage, as aware as I was of the potential for the cards to be used in a variety of ways and situations, such as aiding creative writing skills and counselling for both adults and children, I first had to have people try them out. When I spoke at the exhibition opening about my paintings and the PicTopic cards, I invited members of the audience to play with the cards. I wanted to see if my cards worked as prompts for people to create and tell stories. I asked permission from the audience to film and record their stories. Many agreed, but others were less confident, and so some recorded stories focused on the cards only, and not on the participants themselves. This footage was used in a presentation in June 2009, at our annual DUT Faculty of Arts and Design research conference. I discussed how the cards might be used in a variety of situations to stimulate interaction among people in a playful way, to stimulate creative projects with design students, to enable the development of creative writing skills and in counselling. As a result of my presentation, a lecturer, Lloyd o’Connor, from the DUT drama department invited me to conduct a workshop with its second-year drama students.

In this article, I reflect on this workshop with the drama students and demonstrate how I use a living theory methodology “to improve my practice as a life-affirming practitioner that values in others their individual dynamic and creative energy” (Whitehead, 2008a, p. 1).

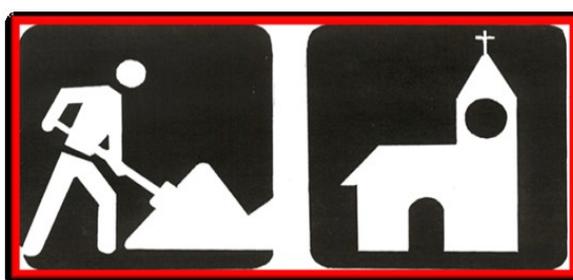
The practice of ‘playing’

What does it mean?

Finding ways to trigger one’s creativity using visual tools such as the PicTopics (see Image 1) to improve students’ performance and confidence, is important to me as an educator. This is linked to the conceptual framework I draw on, as I explore the values associated with fun, playing, creativity and well-being, which are core concepts that support the educational development of the individual.

PicTopics can be effective not only as a teaching tool, but also to encourage feelings of well-being and self-confidence: being creative and feeling proud of the outcomes of one’s activity can lead to personal growth and self-confidence. Playfulness and informality can intuitively unlock embodied and tacit knowledge (Polyani, 1966). I refer to this concept further on in the article as part of the validation process in my assessment of the workshop and the effectiveness of the cards.

Image 1: Example of a PicTopic: Roadside warning sign and another image enabling the images to take on a new meaning



How do pictographic images work?

Pictographic images are used to share information. For example, the triangular warning sign at a roadside depicting a man digging warns motorists that there are men at work and to drive with care. They are simple visual signs that can “represent complex facts” (Abdullah and Hubner, 2006, p. 11). I have used this simplified style because information can be conveyed in a single glance. This is because the pictorial representations of the object symbolised are not usually detailed and the image is reduced to the important distinguishing features only. When a series of PicTopic cards is placed in a sequential order, as Kolars (1969) describes, they become a kind of “pictorial shorthand” (p. 350). Readers are able to recognise each individual abstraction, and then are able to rearrange the PicTopics in a sequence and create their own meaning, sense and story. When the “men at work” PicTopic card (see Image 1) is placed next to an image of a church, this juxtapositioning can create a narrative. People viewing the cards can fill in what they see in the PicTopics with their personal meaning from their own social, historical and cultural perspective. The PicTopics become not only an invaluable prompt or trigger in the creation of a story but simultaneously, could give a researcher insight into the associations that people make, which can lead to investigating how these associations develop and where they originate.

Living theories methodology, values and standards of judgement

What is my living theory and what does it have to do with my values?

My ‘living theory’ contains explanations of the “educational influence in my own learning” (Whitehead, 2008b, p. 104). My encounters in life and my experiences that make me who I am, that colour how I conduct myself as a social being, artist and teacher are facets of my educational experience and influence how I respond to situations. Moreover, because of this influence, I draw on these life experiences – sometimes intuitively and sometimes consciously – to inform and improve my learning, teaching and creativity. The many and varied life experiences inform my values, my theories and the reasons for how I behave. My theories about how to improve my teaching practice are then my “living educational theories” (Whitehead, 2005).

People learn best when they are having fun and enjoy what they are doing. They feel validated if the teacher and others accept their individual and creative liveliness. This belief stems from my lived experiences, as I am far more receptive in a learning environment when I am enjoying what I am doing, when I like my teacher and my teacher likes me. I believe creativity to be a form of “self-actualization” (Maslow, 1999, p. 153) and hence it holds great value. When I am immersed in the act of doing – creating – I experience harmony, a euphoric sense that all is right in the world. Because I acknowledge this in myself, I would like other people also to recognise this cognitive and emotionally inclusive association between the act of creating and well-being.

My “living standards of judgment” (Whitehead, 2005) and criteria for rigour are integral to my beliefs and my values. This means honesty with oneself is integral to the “living theory” genre of action research as an approach to research and teaching. McNiff (2002) confirms that values and beliefs are an integral part of the driving force connected to research, in that “[a]ction research begins with values and the reasons for our actions are often rooted in our values base ... the things that we believe in and that drive our lives” (p. 16).

How am I researching my actions?

Research does not always proceed in a nice neat fashion. McNiff (2002) states that “most people experience research as a zig-zag process of continual review and re-adjustment” (p. 12). The image of the zig-zag resonates with me. It is from the word “zig-zag” that I came to understand that my action-reflection cycles do not spiral, but behave in a sense like ants. Ants zig-zag, purposefully, apparently going off at a

Narrative enquiry and visual methodologies

I concur with Chase's description of narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as being "a retrospective meaning-making ... a shaping or ordering of past experiences; a way to understand one's own and others' actions and of a way to comprehend events into a meaningful whole" (p. 656). Hamilton, Smith and Worthington (2008, p. 19) write of narrative enquiry as offering researchers a way to think about and share their experiences. Time, people and place are distinctive features of narrative enquiry and Hamilton et al. refer to Dewey's (1916, 1922, 1938) emphasis on "lived experience". They recognise that the life experience of the researcher's knowledge is revealed in the narratives generated in educational settings and that research cannot be separated from values or context. I therefore present this account as a narrative of my enquiry, formed out of my experience and coloured by my values.

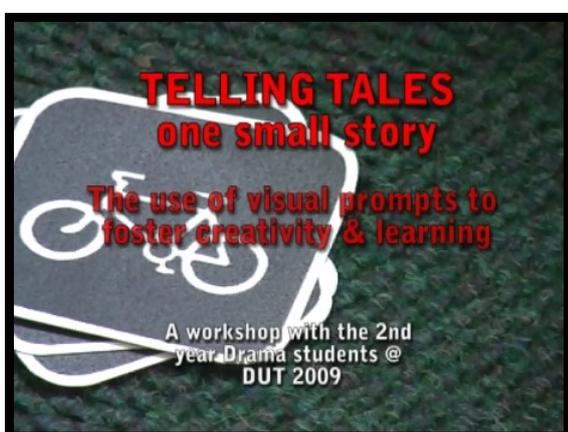
The use of visuals, such as my PicTopics, to assist in the creation of narratives is relevant because "visual images are particularly appropriate to drawing in the participants themselves as central to the interpretive process" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 374). The students at my workshop brought their own experience to bear on the meaning of the images. In other words, they interpreted the images from their own socio-cultural contexts and their embodied and tacit knowledge. This is, I believe, because the PicTopics function as subliminal prompts or triggers and are conduits that allow the conception of creative undertakings, and in the case of the drama workshop, in the facilitation of performance pieces.

On the day of the workshop, I filmed seven performances, the students' rehearsals and my interactions with the groups. From this filming, I created four clips that can be viewed at the website <http://pictographicvoices.blogspot.com> (I will direct the reader to the individual clips when pertinent.)

The joy and confidence expressed in the main clip (see Image 3) is not something that can be fully or adequately transcribed on paper; the group's exuberance in the main clip speaks for the mood and energy demonstrated on the day. The joyfulness and wholeheartedness of the performances that I watched and recorded affirmed my belief in the value of allowing students to communicate their learning experiences in a playful way that allows for autonomy. The video clip of the performance is visible validation and evidence of the physical embodiment of the metaphorical thinking that enabled the students to make the conceptual connections between reading the pictographic images, making associations, creating a narrative and then translating them into a performance.

Image 3: Telling Tales – one small story

Video Clip 1: <http://pictographicvoices.blogspot.com>



The workshop with second-year drama students

What did I do?

In this section, I briefly describe the way the workshop progressed and, for reasons of brevity, will focus on one performance in particular. The types of performances that emerged and which were filmed that day included dance, poetry, comedy, romance and some social pieces about addiction and crime.

At the beginning of the five-hour workshop, I negotiated ethical issues and stated the nature of the workshop. I asked students to use the PicTopic cards as prompts to create narratives that they would then turn into skits. I informed the students that I would be filming them and talking with them while they were rehearsing, and that I would distribute questionnaires to evaluate the success of the PicTopics as creative educational prompts at the end of the workshop. The thirty-seven students agreed to being filmed and to fill out the questionnaires, which would be anonymous. All signed consent forms.

I introduced the students to the concept of the PicTopics by showing them how they could be used and spoke of previous stories that had been told with the PicTopics. I explained my love of stories and how important it was that they created their own. I also explained that they would work in groups with a random selection of about ten cards to create their own type of performance. I reminded them that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and no preferred genres of performance. Unfortunately, I did not give the video camera to anyone to film me while I was introducing myself and delivering my brief, which in retrospect would have been very useful in critically examining how I conducted myself. I did not at the time think it was important; it was more relevant to me what the students were going to do. In hindsight, I would have liked to see whether I was energetic enough. Did I 'sell my product'? Was I convincing, warm, open and friendly? I now realise that improving my practice as a teacher hinges very much on the "life-affirming and loving dynamic energy" that Jack Whitehead talks of (2008b, p. 113), and therefore I will have someone capture my 'performance' in future.

Once the students were in their groups and had their PicTopics, they huddled together around the large practice room, sitting either on the floor or on chairs. They laid out the PicTopics on the floor (see Image 4 and clip "[Part 1: Conversing and Rehearsing](#)"), started examining, exclaiming, excluding, discarding and shuffling the order and creating new sequences. The room vibrated with people vying to get their thoughts included. As I was filming, I noted gesticulating, arguing and conceding, and I watched the group dynamics with interest.

Image 4: Drama students rehearsing (Photo by Scott, 2009)



As their ideas developed, the students scattered, each group finding its own corner or vacant room, corridor or veranda around the drama department to put their performance together. It got loud, with bursts of enchanting singing, foot stomping dance movements, and laughter.

The space was buzzing with energy and excitement (see Image 5 and clip "[Part 1: Conversing and Rehearsing](#)"). Students worked on their own for about an hour and a half and I chatted to the groups individually. I also filmed them while I asking how they were progressing, whether the PicTopics were useful as creative prompts and whether they were able to create stories or narratives from the random set of PicTopics given to them.

Image 5: Laying out the PicTopics (Photo by Scott, 2009)



I also asked about the comprehensibility of images; what other kinds of images they felt could be added to the collection; what shortcomings there were, and so on. It was not a structured interviewing process. I kept it casual and affirming and answered whatever queries they had (see clip "[Part 2: Chatting with the Students](#)" and Image 9). The question asked most often was about the legitimacy of their interpretation of the images. I reminded them that whatever they read into the PicTopics was 'correct' and that there were no 'wrong' answers or responses. The key was that all were there to learn.

What happened?

Once the performances started, I was amazed and intrigued by so many things: the students' confidence, the variety of performances, how excited and galvanised they were, and the high level of cohesiveness and organisation of the groups (considering the short time they had to put together and rehearse their pieces). I was also interested in how some of the images were interpreted (the students held up the cards they had chosen before their performances, as seen in Image 6) and the fact that simple images could prompt such highly individualistic vision.

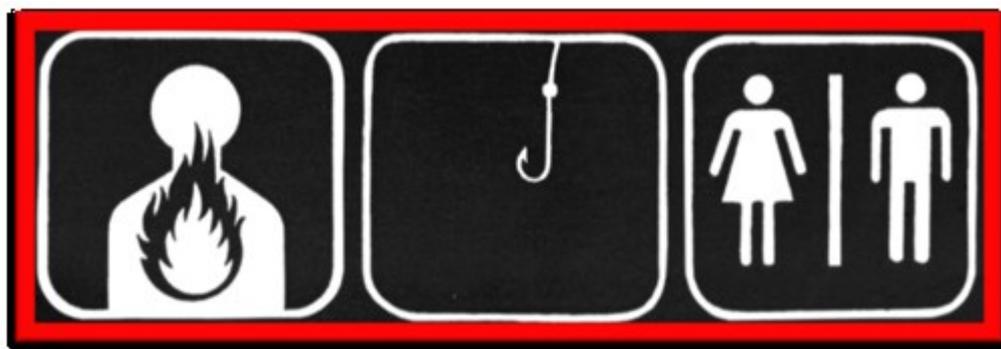
In the clip "[Telling Tales, one small story](#)" (see Image 3) we can see how the students interpreted the PicTopics. They are not only read in a functional way, as expected, but are also contextualised and deciphered in a variety of ways. For example, there is an instance at the beginning of the movie clip when two young men are explaining the story on which their performance is based (see Image 6).

Image 6: A student holding up PicTopic cards in explanation of the narrative he and his group had created (Scott, 2009)



One of the students in the clip “Telling Tales” holds up the three PicTopics that his group selected (see Images 6 and 7) and he explains, on behalf of the group, that they will be using the PicTopic of a male and female pictogram to talk about the union of men and women as a metaphor for marriage. The next PicTopic is of a fishing hook which is used to represent the meeting up or ‘hooking up’ of the individuals. The last PicTopic, which is that of a silhouetted figure with flames drawn up within the outline of the person, represents the passion that is ignited between the two betrothed.

Image 7: Three PicTopics used by the drama students to create a skit (Images: Dreyfuss, 1972; Scott, 2009; Evamy, 2003)



Other associations that were made with the cards were the image of a train that could be read as either a robot or a television set and an image of lungs read as a symbol for trees and nature (see Images 8 and 9).

Image 8: PicTopics image of a lung is used to depict a tree (Scott, 2009)



Image 9: A PicTopic that could be explained either as an electric train, television set or robot (Scott, 2009)



Reflecting on the work while watching the movie clips provides insight into the ebullience of the performers. Their knowing-in-action was made manifest in this playful creative workshop (Schön, 1983, p. 54). I also noted that the narratives were constructed in a traditional with a beginning, middle and an end. A number of themes emerged as experiences were layered. Simultaneously I observed reflection and re-remembering happening when the students expressed the embodied form of their learning consciously and unconsciously. I observed a sense of playfulness in the students' performances and was awed by their positive confidence and passionate energy. Because the students had the autonomy to create their own performances, they responded by showing their love for and personal commitment to their craft.

How do I assess the validity of this workshop?

In this section, I draw on three tools to assess the validity of the workshop.

Evidence of learning, play, creativity and well-being

Judging the performances by my living standards of judgement (Whitehead, 2005) which are intrinsically linked with the values I uphold, I noted the students' sense of creative well-being and the unity of their whole being. Through the act of playing, the students were enticed by the freedom to create something of their own. This autonomy of being enabled them to create their own narrative and motivated them to give their best and in turn confirms my living theories and standards of judgement.

The usefulness of the PicTopics is assessed against the value systems I uphold. I used my living standards of judgement as my criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshop, these being the playfulness, the creativity, the fun and the well-being that seemed evident from beginning to end. Thus, when viewing the film of the workshop, I noted down the evidence of 'fun', 'creativity', 'well-being' and 'play' in the students' expression of their knowledge. The variety of stories and performances indicates the usefulness of PicTopics in stimulating the imagination. The enthusiasm, spontaneity and passionate engagement of the students, reflected in the performances, demonstrated enjoyment and exhilaration, confirming the value of the PicTopics as a tool to prompt creativity.

The students in action and their total absorption in the task was akin to a "flow experience" or "optimal experience", terms coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1988, p. 3), and describes it as occurring in moments "when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something that is difficult or worthwhile". Csikszentmihalyi writes that there is a "oneness with the activity" (p. 34), meaning that there is this unity between mind, body and soul, knowledge and action, as everything just 'flows'. The unity of the students in their groups in the production of something meaningful, supported by the PicTopics, induced the expression of their tacit and embodied knowledge.

Feedback and personal communication

Lloyd o'Connor provided feedback on the workshop, which helped to validate my theories about the positive benefits of visual prompts in teaching in the arts. He was asked to comment on how successful and effective (or not) he thought the pictographic cards were at prompting the visual expression of what the students have been learning in the programme and whether they helped to foster creativity. His response is given verbatim below:

The pictographic cards were an excellent source of inspiration for the students. The students, without realising, were engaging in a sophisticated process that was not only a creative process but also a performative one as well.

The element of 'play' is very evident and immediate especially when viewing the footage taken of the class. The students manipulated the cards to suit their needs and to the needs of what they were creating. The students engaged with a number of narratives through the cards that evolved from purely a visual narrative through to a performance narrative.

The question of 'autonomy' in a creative process is important because I suppose it is as much about the students' sense of agency and that they own the process. Although some cards did have symbols on them that were perhaps less open to manipulation than others, the students became interlocutors with each other and with the cards, each member of each group was able to read meaning from the cards and use it to contribute to the end performance.

The cards are an incredibly useful tool and I would very much like a set to do further performance work with students. (Drama teacher, personal communication, September 23, 2010).

I also asked the students to write about how they found their experienced using the pictographic cards.

I have recorded a selection of comments to capture the tone of the feedback. The last two comments are a clear example of why a follow-up session with the individuals would have been beneficial to my research, and to expanding my personal learning:

Yes, I did find [the cards] useful; actually it helped us to create scenes as a group to portray. The fact [is] that we got ideas from it and came up with something solid and useful.

They [the cards] made us co-ordinate our creativity.

They [the cards] prompt one to use a visual stimulus to engage our imaginations. They did challenge us to expand on our spontaneous imaginary thinking.

People came up with beautiful stories and personally it activated my creative skills.

They helped me think on the spot and helped me have a creative mind, in so we were able to create a picture out of our bodies, speech and mind.

I didn't see the point of the whole task; we looked at the picture and made a story that was boring.

The cards didn't give us much (sic) options to be creative.

The students' feedback corroborated my thoughts on the validity of 'playing' by using visual images to express embodied learning. I have taken note of which images the drama students thought should be added to the deck of cards, and I find I am continually adding to the body of images. Unfortunately, because the questionnaires were anonymous and because the workshop was, in a sense, a test of the PicTopic cards, I was not able to engage in one-on-one interactions with those students who expressed dissatisfaction. I would have liked to find out why these students considered the task pointless and why they thought that the cards did not give them options to be creative. Their feedback could have helped me to discern whether there were readability problems with the images, or if they saw the need for more images. Without personal interaction I could not pick up on whether the students' unhappiness was to do with the concept of the cards as creative prompts, or if it was a reflection of group politics. I have considered this and at future workshops I intend to ask individuals or groups for their full permission to carry out one-on-one feedback sessions. In retrospect, I would also have liked to know how they went about deciding which images to use and the actual processes that were involved in the creation of their performance pieces. This leaves room for further exploration.

Reflection

Using the PicTopics as a simple and playful visual methodology is one way to encourage and have students immersed in the task. The students intuitively demonstrated their tacit and embodied learning. Their stories gave me insights into their socio-cultural experiences and worlds that I am not a part of. The performances mirrored social realities and I learnt from the students how connected they are with many social and environmental concerns. The performances validated the students' "knowing in action" (Schön, 1983, p. 51) and their "embodied" (Whitehead, 2010, p. 1) and "tacit" knowledge (Polanyi, 1966, p. 7) of performance.

Reflecting upon what happened at the workshop, I can demonstrate how my living standards of judgement which encompass my values are continually validated by the visual embodiment of play, fun, well-being and creativity. With this in mind then, I used my living standards of judgement to analyse, assess, and improve upon the pictographic cards as a way to facilitate learning. In this demonstration of my educational influence and living standards of judgement (Whitehead, 2005), I hope to inspire other researchers and teachers to find transformative, alternate, playful and fun ways to encourage students to demonstrate their deep and embodied learning.

The video clips provide evidence of visual representations of communication and high levels of organisation within the groups. The dynamics of the students' interactions with each other, in their movements and

voices, cannot be adequately expressed on paper but are illustrated in the various clips filmed during the workshop and available at <http://pictographicvoices.blogspot.com>.

When I watched the performances and the interviews with some of the groups I noted that the members of the teams were all working with each other. I saw them sitting huddled together going through the various PicTopics, discussing and interpreting the images, deciding on their meaning and deciding which PicTopics would be relevant.

The students also applied their evaluative skills as I watched and listened to them discussing each PicTopic, debating if it would have value in the conceptualising of their narrative. I saw this in the clip, too; they did it by laying out all the cards on the floor or on tables and going through a process of elimination. The students interpreted, critically analysed and evaluated the images on the PicTopics. They abandoned some PicTopics, then regrouped others and changed the associations that developed by putting various PicTopics together.

As they talked and planned their performances, the students were engaged in getting consensus from each other on what the story or skit should be, who should play which role, and the type of performance that would suit their narrative. A series of negotiations took place so that all the members of the group could agree upon a story. The script they developed was collaborative. The students had to identify and solve problems including dealing with the dynamics of a group and having to be sensitive and inclusive of each other. They agreed to the specific roles they were assigned to achieve a successful result (the performance). That they worked it out together verifies that they employed both their tacit knowledge and the skills imparted and absorbed as learners. They did not solve problems in isolation; they did so in a critical and creative way. This validated their understanding of the task put to them. These actions are visually recorded and demonstrate that the students could and did communicate effectively.

They also recalled and applied specific screen- or script-writing skills learnt in the course. They comprehended the brief and the aim of the workshop and recalled facts about developing a concept and then, as a group, choreographed their narrative and transformed it into a visual representation. They willingly responded to the challenges of the day and appeared motivated to try something new.

I was aware, when watching the performances and considering them, that in all the visual articulation, whether serious or humorous, the students were all attuned to value systems. Their externalisation of internalised values comes through in the types of narratives they developed. For example the narrative in the hard-hitting drug-themed production, “You are a Failure” (see Image 10 and clip “[Part 4: You are a Failure](#)”) shows that the students are attuned to and critical of social realities. In the one of the performances, the students presented their environmental values and their awareness of a considerably important world issue through dance and poetry.

Image 10: From the skit and clip “[You are a Loser](#)” (Scott, 2009)



What did I learn from this experience and what does this tell me about my practice and theory?

My theories about the interconnectivity between play, creativity and well-being in a teaching and learning environment, are manifest in the actions of these students and are confirmed by their stories told in performance. The evidence shows how playing can unlock and release embodied and tacit knowledge by using PicTopics as an alternative way to prompt creative responses. This is visible in the facial expressions of the students while they were practicing, in their communication with each other, and by the high volume of good and busy noise, and in the movement of their bodies while performing. As a visual learner myself, I appreciate the value of using visual images to enhance my own learning for improved academic performance and achievement. Other visual learners can also benefit from such visual prompts.

The experience with the drama students suggests strongly that playful ways to release deep learning are pertinent. Upon reflection, I realise that if I did not have particular beliefs and values, I never would have thought of the very simple idea of creating playing cards that could be used by people to tell me their tales. Whitehead's (2008c) statement, "I feel privileged when individuals share stories that reveal the values and understandings they use to give meaning and purpose to their lives" (p. 1) resonates with me.

I was validated that someone could see the potential of the cards and invited me to work with his students. I have learnt that my living theories fuel the core concepts of my teaching practice: that of the importance of play in teaching and learning, the value of autonomy as a way for students to give evidence of their tacit and embodied knowledge, and the enjoyment of my artistic and educational spaces.

What Next?

I will be conducting another workshop with the drama teacher and his students. The next time I plan to have two video cameras and each will film specific parts of the workshop. I want to be filmed so that I can critically reflect on my communication skills and take note of my enthusiasm or lack thereof; whether I engage effectively with the students; whether I am clear, understandable and open to students who want to engage with me. There is potential in both the PicTopics and the workshop for expansion and links with other disciplines.

Conclusion

Since the workshop, I have given a number of sets of PicTopics to colleagues to play with. They have been used as prompts in creative writing development and as an introductory icebreaker for new students to get to know each other. A teacher friend has used them with her seven-year-old learners and others with tertiary students from a higher education institution. The feedback I have received has been extremely positive and it is those new stories I would like to write about in the future.

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