Visual inquiry
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Visual inquiry: a method for exploring the emotional, cognitive and experiential worlds in practice development, research and education

Abstract

Background: Collaboratively exploring what matters to people, their understanding of concepts and ideas for innovation can be a challenge in practice development, research and education due to potential difficulties in articulating complex issues. Visual Inquiry is described as a process which involves the use of generic images to facilitate dynamic dialogue between the inquirer and participant/s, in order to support shared understanding and co-production of knowledge.

Aims and Objectives: The aim was twofold, firstly to describe the Visual Inquiry method and secondly to explore the experiences of using Visual Inquiry in practice development, research and education.

Research Design: Qualitative data was generated from a group of academics (n=8) who took part in a Co-operative inquiry, exploring their experience of using this method (Visual inquiry) in fifteen independent studies.

Findings: Eight academics (inquirers) drew on their experience of using Visual Inquiry from fifteen independent studies. Analysis of the qualitative data identified eight themes in relation to the process and outcomes of using Visual Inquiry; Evocative Participation; Playfulness; Holding vulnerability; Welcoming authenticity; Illumination; Surfacing depth; Unearthing possibilities; Evoking surprise and Provocation.

Conclusion: Visual Inquiry was found to be a useful method for opening up dialogue which allowed the facilitator to adapt a flexible approach and the participant to richly articulate insights on their cognitive, emotional and experiential worlds.

Implications for Practice:

- Visual Inquiry is a useful method for practitioners looking to open up dialogue, and uncover tacit knowledge, in practice development, research and education
- Visual Inquiry is a particularly useful method for those new to facilitation, practice development and research and encourages an improvisational approach
Co-operative inquiry enables us to gain insight into our own practice and explore possibilities for the future.

Keywords: Visual Inquiry, Co-operative Inquiry, interviews, photo elicitation, imagery

Background

Practice development is described as a continuous journey of developing and innovating in care settings and key to enabling this to happen is listening to and using the stories and experiences from people who give and receive services (Garbett and McCormack, 2002; Dewing et al., 2014). A focus on creating new possibilities through dialogue is shared by both practice development and the fields of research and academia. However, exploring what matters to people, their experiences and understanding of complex concepts can be a challenge. Questions asked during qualitative interviews can facilitate self-expression on the part of interviewee; however, a number of factors may influence the types of responses given. Van House (2006, p. 1464) accounts for some of these potential influences:

When respondents are asked to recall their actions, intentions, or understandings, their memories may be incomplete or inaccurate. They may give shortened or simplified accounts of complex events or reasoning. And their reports may be influenced by their perceptions of the researchers' expectations.

The use of imagery during interviews is one possible way of addressing these challenges, as this technique has the potential to lessen emotional and cognitive barriers (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017) and to deepen the relationship between the inquirer and participant (Harris & Guillemin, 2012; Padgett et al., 2013). This article will discuss the findings of a Co-operative Inquiry groups exploration of the use of Visual Inquiry in their own research and practice.

Imagery can be used in research or other contexts including practice development to open up dialogue through a variety of mediums. Methods which use film/video include
but are not limited to video ethnography, video elicitation, video stimulated recall and participatory film-making. The use of imagery in the form of photographs/pictures or illustrations can also take a number of forms, including but not limited to: photo elicitation, photo voice, photolanguage, and associative imagery technique.

When using photographs or pictures, there are some variances with regard to the types of images used and the process of using the images within each of the approaches listed above. In the case of photoelicitation and photovoice the picture or image is created by the researcher and/or participant. Sets of generic images are used in photolanguage (black and white images) and associative imagery technique (spectrum of colours). The process often has a level of control exerted by the facilitator/researcher, for example that there be silence when picking images in the photolanguage approach. The types of images used are also specific, for example to the topic of the inquiry (Bessell et al., 2007; Vacheret, 2004; White et al., 2009).

The term ‘Visual Inquiry’ was created to reflect the particular features of this use of imagery in opening up dialogue that is described in this article. ‘Visual Inquiry’ was chosen by those using this method as it forefronts the ‘inquiry’ aspect of this visual method; the inquirer is engaging from a place of openness and curiosity as to the emotional, cognitive and experiential worlds of participants. Visual Inquiry has been used by the authors of this article for a range of intentions including: supporting interviews; enabling understanding of values, events and experiences; facilitating relationship building and connection; and sharing of knowledge. It has been used in participatory research, practice development, experiential education or spontaneously with students, staff, clients, residents or carers; in a range of health and social care settings including clinical (hospital, community, residential, forensic) and other learning and online environments.

The process of Visual Inquiry involves displaying a set of generic images of both symbolic and literal nature to trigger more meaningful dialogue, for example, images might include polar bears on ice, a maze, a child with a multi-coloured umbrella, and an animal in a cage (for more information, see...
As well as being a mixture of symbolic and literal images other features of the images include: clarity of image (can be seen from a distance), combination of images featuring people, landscapes and object and images which include a variety of facial expressions which may convey different emotions. The reverse side of each of the Visual Inquiry cards has no image; instead this side has one colour recognising that for some people a single colour may more closely resonate with their feeling/thought/experience than an image.

The images are laid out on the floor or any other hard surface. The inquirer invites participants to pick an image and poses an open ‘stem’ question to the participant, such as, ‘Select an image that sums up what involvement means to you’. The participant/s are then invited to choose one (or more) images which resonate with them in response to the open stem question. While choosing an image there may be some conversation between participants, and, if more than one participant wishes to pick the same card, they are invited to share it.

It is important to note that participants are not be forced to pick an image, if they do not wish to do so. If a participant expresses that they do not wish to pick an image, or cannot identify an image in response to the stem question they are then invited to consider if there is an alternative way they would like to share their perspective. When participants have picked an image, the inquirer asks the participant/s in turn to share (to the level with which they feel comfortable) why they picked that particular image to talk about the stem question. Using the method may take anything from a few minutes (e.g. icebreaker to help a group integrate and connect) to considerably longer (e.g. feedback session on teaching, research interview, practice development meeting).

In summary the principle distinguishing features of Visual Inquiry are:

- One set of images being used across a variety of settings and contexts
- Accessible method for those with varying levels of facilitation experience
- Adaptability of the method with scope for improvisation
The benefits of the use of images as part of an interview process has been illustrated in a wide range of studies; for instance, providing a voice to different groups of participants (Dewar 2012, Gong et al., 2012; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017; Schwingel et al., 2015), accessing tacit knowledge (Dewar 2012; Hatten et al., 2013), enhancing the education process (Linz et al., 2011; Garner, 2014), enriching data analysis before, during and after interviews as well as helping participants to articulate potentially difficult concepts (Kruse, 1999; Dewar, 2012). As described above, there have been several research studies that have articulated the benefits of using images in the interview process and this has been reported across a wide range of disciplines. However a systematic inquiry into the experience of those who have used images in the research, teaching and their own studies has not been carried out.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of using Visual Inquiry in research, education and practice development in a range of health, social care and academic settings as part of a Co-operative Inquiry group. Following on from this aim, a key objective of this article is to describe the Visual Inquiry method and the different contexts in which Visual Inquiry has been used whilst also reporting on the experiences of researchers, teachers and PhD students when using this method.

Research Design

A group of eight academics (researchers, teachers and PhD students) were invited to participate in the study based on their experiences of using Visual Inquiry in research, education and practice development. The Co-operative Inquiry group drew their experience of the method from fifteen independent studies (see Table 1); this potentially strengthens the findings of the study due to the variety of skill mix, multiple participants and assortment of settings.

[Insert Table 1.]
Over the course of one year (2015-2016), a Co-operative Inquiry approach was used to develop the aims and methods and to explore the experiences of the eight academics using Visual Inquiry in research, education and practice settings. The key feature of Co-operative Inquiry is the value given to everyone’s experience, expertise and full participation, with an emphasis on active partnership (Heron and Reason, 2006).

The first step in data generation was the co-creation of and distribution of open-ended questions to the Co-operative Inquiry Group generated via an email discussion in the early stage of the study. Co-operative Inquiry group members were invited to use Visual Inquiry cards in their responses and took up this opportunity. Questions included:

- When have you used Visual Inquiry
- What have you learnt along the way?
- What do you remain curious about?
- What are the benefits and impact?
- What are the challenges?
- What examples can you share with us that illustrate responses to these questions?

In using the method:

- What has surprised you?

Data generation within the Co-operative Inquiry was drawn from personal writing, group discussions and email exchanges. The answers to the above questions were collated and fed back to the group members for further discussion and elaboration of content the findings of which went on to inform the initial insights and emerging themes. This Co-operative Inquiry continued iteratively over the course of the study whereby discussion of the emerging themes led to in-depth analysis of the resonance and relevance of the themes to the inquiry members’ experience of the practical use of images, thereby enhancing the quality and trustworthiness of the data collection process. To situate the learning from the ongoing Co-operative Inquiry in the context of the body of knowledge, a scoping literature review was undertaken to include other forms of visual techniques which used photographs or picture, namely photovoice, photolanguage, and associative imagery technique.
Ethical Considerations

The Chair of the School of Health, Nursing and Midwifery Ethics Committee at UWS advised that ethical approval was not required for the overall Co-operative Inquiry group, as ethical approval had been given for all the individually quoted Visual Inquiry studies on which the Co-operative Inquiry was based. Nonetheless, all members of the Co-operative Inquiry group were consulted and gave consent for their reflections on the Visual Inquiry approach to be shared within the article. Consent was seen as an ongoing process rather than a one off event and we discussed what data was being generated and how it would be used during each Co-operative Inquiry group meeting.

Data Analysis

Immersion/Crystallisation techniques (Borkan, 1999) were used to analyse the data. This method of analysis makes use of ‘self’ in engaging both cognitive and emotional processes to explore depth of meaning to ‘hear, see, and feel the data’ (Borkan, 1999, p.180). The approach can be collaborative and goes through seven key stages which are documented in Table 2. The process of immersion/crystallisation was much more recursive than linear and allowed for an openness to the insights that were emerging bringing additional depth to the discussion and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

This section provides an analysis of the key themes emerging from the discussions of the Co-operative Inquiry group about the experiences of using the method across a range of research studies, practice development and education interventions. Two key themes which emerged related to both process and outcomes of using this method were ‘evocative participation’ and ‘illumination’. Each theme and subtheme is discussed separately but it is important to note here that there is some overlap between themes.
Evocative Participation

‘Evocative participation’ suggests an engagement that stretches and stimulates in new directions, and which pays heed to our various ways of knowing through honouring experiential, emotional and cognitive processes in both ourselves and others. It can be light-hearted, fun, energising and enable people to look at questions, experiences and concepts from a different perspective, especially when used in a safe environment where risks can be taken (Sharp et al., 2018). A safe environment in this context is reflective of psychological safety which has been described as ‘a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking’ (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350). ‘Evocative Participation’ emerged as a key theme from a number of subthemes: ‘playfulness’, ‘holding vulnerability’ and ‘welcoming authenticity’.

Playfulness will be discussed in terms of how curiosity, creativity and spontaneity in Visual Inquiry can positively disrupt the usual flow of an interview or group discussion. The ways in which both the inquirers and participants in a Visual Inquiry activity being open to the experience of being vulnerable will be described under ‘Holding Vulnerability’. This will be followed with a discussion on how the Visual Inquiry method is one means by which people can access what is ‘real and true’ for them, and go on to share from this authentic place.

Playfulness

Playfulness links with the concept of playful provocation, described by Sharp et al. (2018) as a positive way of disrupting normal flow. The Co-operative Inquiry group suggested the process opened ‘a new and bright way of working’ and was a ‘light-hearted exercise’ with some describing a sense of ‘playfulness’.

Playfulness in this context relating to curiosity, creativity and spontaneity (Guitard et al., 2005), while still giving due respect and attention to the potentially sensitive and emotive nature of the topics being discussed. This playfulness was felt to help to release tension that can arise from the possible intensity of an interview experience.

Visual Inquiry appears to facilitate a ‘humble’ approach (Schein, 2013) to interviewing/group discussion through the genuine interest and curiosity of the inquirer,
and the capacity for the use of images to allow the participant to take a playful approach
to the answering of the question.

I particularly like being surprised by the responses evoked by different images
and the way in which the process hands over control – to a certain extent – to the
individuals involved. I also like the fact that individuals seem to enjoy the process
and are interested in it (Inquirer 8).

This playfulness also appeared to generate a sense of energy in the Visual Inquiry activity
where it was described as being ‘more story telling rather than fact based as I feel
sharing stories can potentially generate more energy than sharing facts’ (Inquirer 4).

Some of the Co-operative Inquiry group members spoke of the playful element in terms
of the physicality of using the images, the shared dialogue and jokes when vying for the
same image, or when expressing how this was something new and different for them.
The finding space to place the cards, whilst a challenge, meant that cards were
sometimes scattered on a table top or floor area so the participants had to walk around,
or crouch down in order to see the cards more closely. This was found to be helpful in
creating a more relaxed atmosphere. This relates to Carlsen et al.’s., (2014) suggestion
that tactile stimulation can produce generative ideas. This playful approach appears to
link with generativity, the challenging of accepted norms and opening up of new
possibilities, as discussed by Bushe and Paranjpey (2015, p.331) who suggest
‘practitioners may want to experiment with ways of priming participants somatically,
with perhaps visual metaphors, and ways of ‘holding ideas in their hands’. From the
perspective of the Co-operative Inquiry group members, visual inquiry as an approach
appears to facilitate this process.

The process of physically selecting an image was felt to have benefits. The fact that the
participant has to change their posture by uncrossing their arms to choose a photograph
can result in physiological, psychological and behavioural changes to the individual. This
action potentially impacts on hormones and reduced cortisol levels (Carney et al, 2010),
which may lead to decreased anxiety levels. Participation in Visual Inquiry can also
change the physical dynamics between the enabler and participant in relation to posture
and position. There is a less face to face encroachment on personal space using this technique as it often requires a ‘side by side’ position. This shoulder to shoulder communication approach is thought to be less invasive and has been noted to be more acceptable, particularly in men (Nelson, 2014).

Within the literature, which gives descriptions on the use of imagery in research/therapy, there has tended to be a focus which forefronts a set structure to the activity, for example to the process of how participants pick the images. The findings of the Co-operative Inquiry suggest that structure such as a carefully worded stem question and turn-taking by participants when sharing their thoughts are very necessary to the success of the method, and that within this structure there is scope for flexibility. Examples of this flexibility discussed by Co-operative Inquiry group members include: participants having conversations (or not) whilst picking the image, participants changing their mind and picking an alternate image, or participants picking more than one image at a time. Further playful, improvisational approaches to the use of images in research and practice development was discussed the Co-operative Inquiry group as being an area worthy of future exploration.

**Holding Vulnerability**

Co-operative Inquiry group members shared how Visual Inquiry fostered a sense of vulnerability. Brown (2012, p.34) described vulnerability as ‘uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure’ and highlighted the necessary place for vulnerability in creating connection, and cultivating courage and compassion. Vulnerability presented in the Co-operative Inquiry group in two ways: the vulnerability of the person facilitating the Visual Inquiry exercise and the vulnerability of those who were involved as participants. One Co-operative Inquiry group member recalled using a Visual Inquiry activity at the beginning of a meeting as a ‘way in’ to being open about some anxieties she was experiencing with regard to fearing that the work she was presenting might not meet the expectations of those present.

This then led to others at the meeting sharing about how they felt about the work, and how they would like her to feel by the end of the meeting.
...without the image cards I’m not sure if I would have been able to share how I was feeling...it felt like they made it more acceptable to share at this level without sounding like I was over-sharing. (Inquirer 4)

Group members shared feelings of uncertainty about using this method, with initial feelings of hesitancy and tentativeness. Some talked of concerns over potential scepticism from participants and colleagues and having the courage to try it out. There was a holding of their own vulnerability in these early stages, alongside ‘being brave enough to try it and trust it (Inquirer 8). A number of the group members were relatively new to inquiry when they began using this method and so there was a comfort attached to using an approach that felt possible and did not rely on the expert skill of the inquirer:

what I found most surprising about using this method was how accessible it was to both myself as a novice researcher and also for the participants who had never used this method before...even with limited confidence, the process unfolds itself and does not require much direction from a facilitator or researcher. (Inquirer 3).

One Co-operative Inquiry group member picked a lighthouse as an image to represent how they felt about Visual Inquiry:

It (lighthouse) signifies safety for a method that I found simple and accessible to use both for me and the participants (Inquirer 3).

As well as holding their own vulnerability there were discussions regarding the participants’ fear of giving a wrong answer and how that could be managed by the inquirer, which also highlighted the importance of ensuring clarity in the stem question and reassuring the participants that whatever they say was valid:

...at times people may need reassurance that there is no right answer. That the question you ask is important on whether the exercise will be successful as it might be (Inquirer 2).
This clarity in the construction of the question was deemed important so that the interviewee would not struggle over the questions meaning, so that the question itself would not become a distraction. Rather, that due to the stem question being clear and concise that the interviewee could focus on their response.

When presenting an account of the use of Visual Inquiry, the Co-operative Inquiry group members felt it important to extend beyond a cognitive representation of using this method and to practice the theme of Vulnerability. This enabled the Co-operative Inquiry group to offer an insight into the emotional experience of using Visual Inquiry, hence the sharing of the feelings of uncertainty experienced, particularly when starting out with this method.

**Welcoming Authenticity**

One Co-operative Inquiry group member also expressed how, whilst taking part in a data generation activity during her PhD, for her, the physical act of holding an image card helped her to share more openly:

> In some way the card acts as a buffer, so that in a group of new people it allows a holding of space and of story so that there was the possibility to share with depth without feeling exposed (Inquirer 4).

This buffer effect is similar to the description by Vacheret (2004) of the photo as an intermediary, where both the speaker and those listening feel honoured, due to the significant amount of attentiveness given to the speaker, and the fact that the photo acts as a ‘third-party’. Vacheret (2004) suggests that the question and the image provide stability to the process, and that the image provides a support to the person in terms of how it can affirm their own thinking.

As the method is simple, relatively quick and accessible to use, it is viewed as supportive to both the inquirer and the participant. It may enable the focus to stay on the desired topic whilst also remaining grounded in human connection. The findings of the Co-
operative Inquiry group discussion are in line with what has been previously highlighted within the literature in terms of how the use of imagery can prompt hidden emotional responses (Collier, 1957), provide richness in discussion (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017) and support depth when participants share their recollection of experience (Harper, 2002). All of which may enable a participant to engage more of themselves to a greater extent than what may be encouraged through the use of verbal interview techniques (Collier, 1957; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2017).

I was surprised at the volume of data/information that can come from people selecting an image and explaining their choice. Additionally, I found it surprising how open people were about their emotional or personal experience. I am unsure if a simple conversation or interview would elicit the same response (Inquirer 3).

It would appear from the data which emerged during the Co-operative Inquiry group discussions that Visual Inquiry can facilitate authentic, genuine responses and is one means by which to address the power relationships between researcher and participant. This is integral to qualitative research methods, although it can prove challenging to achieve (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The use of Visual Inquiry, as with other methods which endeavour to address power imbalances, is in keeping with theory from within relational constructionism and feminist research in terms of questioning and potentially disrupting established norms of where power is held (Hosking and Pluut, 2010; Pink, 2007). The Co-operative Inquiry group highlighted the ability of Visual Inquiry to enable authentic responses from participants, through providing a space for individuals to feel safe to share their personal experiences/ and feelings:

I have been surprised at how articulate participants can be when using Visual Inquiry they say much more about how they feel, and the image seems to provoke a different level of articulation (Inquirer 1).

While it may be easy to assume an understanding of another’s position, inquiring into an individual’s personal views, expressed via images can bring about a level of unexpected authenticity whereby there is an opportunity for their ‘lens’ to be brought into discussion and shared to enable understanding and an acknowledgment of
difference. There is opportunity for shared learning within this as new landscapes of ideas and possibilities open up through hearing the alternative perspectives of others when they share on the image they have picked (Vacheret, 2004). This was also reflected in how participants selected images. One member of the Co-operative Inquiry group stated:

People are open to trying something different. Slightly different styles people have when picking cards, i.e. some people know what they’d like to say and pick an image that fits that, others pick the card first and use that to help them arrive at what they’d like to share (Inquirer 4).

The use of images appears to lessen rhetoric and facilitate individuals to describe their experience in a unique and authentic way:

Participants and students have the opportunity to speak freely about a subject, without the researcher/lecturer putting words into their mouths. This seems to offer the opportunity for individuals to provide a true reflection around how they feel about a subject (Inquirer 5).

The above quote illustrates the power of the image to enable us to access and connect with our own ‘inner images’, it may be a memory/emotion/sensory experience from another time and place, and consequently to be gifted with hearing the inner images of others. Sometimes connection with emotions can take people by surprise and this emphasises the importance of creating a safe environment, reflective of psychological safety as discussed under the theme of evocative participation. One way of achieving this may be through development of agreed ways of working (Dewar et al., 2017) where discussion takes place about what would help participants if there is expression of strong emotion.

Illumination

The theme of Illumination comprised the sub themes of surfacing depth, unearthing possibilities, and creating surprise/provocation. This relates to what one Co-operative
Inquiry group member described as ‘shedding light’ on participants lived reality and experiences. It can be beneficial to both the participant and the inquirer as it may encourage a deeper understanding and appreciation both of our own experience and that of others. A new metaphor is offered in relation to this aspect of sharing personal experiences when using images in research/process- that of the ‘soft light’ and ‘spot light’. The process of using Visual Inquiry encourages the use of a ‘soft light’ in illuminating an individuals or a groups stories. The Co-operative Inquiry group highlighted that people are not placed under a ‘spot light’ and coerced into sharing what they would not choose to reveal, rather a gentle curiosity is awoken on why an image has been selected and what meaning it holds for the individual.

**Surfacing depth**

Members of the Co-operative Inquiry group described how the process enabled what was previously unknown or possibly assumed, to come to the light of understanding:

> It is maybe like the lamp shedding light on the forest floor where there is so much life happening. The pictures can help to illuminate areas that others might not otherwise have been able to share in (Inquirer 4).

Group members observed and commented on how individuals, when asked a question, would commonly take their time to pause and select an image and wondered if this was a time in which the person could engage in moments of reflection and analysis. This element of taking time to pause appears to be new within the literature and so may be a helpful point of consideration for those interested in trying out this method. The group were curious that this time and space might afford an opportunity for the person to go deeper, and to shed more light on thoughts or feelings related to an experience. This relates to what Harrison (2002, p.864) described as the ‘reflexivity between image and the verbalisation which produces data for the investigator’. This reflexive awareness evoked during the process could be viewed as a form of co-analysis during data collection.

Further and crucially, there was a feeling of safety in supporting participants to bring their experiences to light with others:
Safety for a method I found simple and accessible to use, both for me and the participants and also the light element for how it shone a light on the participants so clearly (Inquirer 3).

As has been previously discussed members of the Co-operative Inquiry group spoke of Visual Inquiry as shedding light. There was also an acknowledgement that this light may be illuminating areas which were, up to this point, in the shadow and therefore of the need to proceed gently:

...images accessing deeper memories and the importance of taking care when using the cards because the emotional response can take participants by surprise (Inquirer 7).

So it would appear that the use of images was perceived to enable people to travel deep, and then bring their ‘findings’ to the surface.

Unearthing Possibilities

The value in not knowing and being genuinely curious to seek what others may think, or may have experienced was discussed as an additional benefit of Visual Inquiry. This relates to Appreciative Inquiry approaches (the underpinning methodology in a number of the studies in table 1.) where the focus is on possibilities rather than problems (Cooperrider et al., 2008). One group member when asked to sum up their experience of using Visual Inquiry described this as ‘perhaps something that starts from a small seed and grows into something quite beautiful’ (Inquirer 5). There was a sense that the ‘answers’ are there within us as individuals or as a group and the method of Visual Inquiry can ‘unearth’ what is lying dormant within a person, participant or team. Hatten et al. (2013, p.23.89.3) describe this as facilitating individuals to access tacit knowledge, the sense of you ‘know it when you see it’. As is illustrated in Table 1.0, Co-operative Inquiry group members individually used this method across a variety of settings where the use of images has not been reported on previously and consistently found that it holds considerable value. Whilst it might not be possible to be used with certain individuals for example, those who are confused, or have visual impairments, it has been
used successfully with individuals with cognitive impairment. An example of its successful use with people with cognitive impairments is described below, when a resident in a care home was consulted on what he would like in a new care home being built, he picked an image of ducks and shared:

I would want ducks at the new care home. Everyone can feed the ducks, doesn’t matter who you are. It’s nice to feed things, makes you feel good that they are eating up. You don’t have to speak when feeding the ducks – you are sitting alongside others. It’s outside. Kids may want to come up and feed the ducks (Research Study 15).

When we as a Co-operative Inquiry group discussed the story above we felt it unearthed the possibility of how a person with dementia could contribute to a focus group discussion.

**Evoking surprise and provocation**

Selection of the images was seen as powerful in promoting provocation. Provocation can be witty, playful, challenging, questioning and encouraging (Pangrazio, 2017). Provocation can excite, intrigue, arrest thought, and interrupt flow (Heinonen and Ruotsalainen, 2013; Sharp et al., 2018). It can help us to look at things through a different vantage point aimed at challenging assumptions whereby ‘it can be easy to jump to conclusions as to what a certain image might mean and then when the person shares realise it is something quite different’ (Inquirer 4).

The provocation evoked by this surprise element of varying interpretations of images appeared to promote a deeper level of consideration and seemed to help people to create possibilities for thinking in a different way. Thus differing interpretations of the same image supports what an Co-operative Inquiry group member described as ‘holding our assumptions lightly’. All who took part in the Co-operative Inquiry group highlighted how they have been, at times, surprised how there is the possibility of the previously unseen or unconsidered to emerge each time they use the images.
Even when the images feel familiar that there is still the possibility that each time they are used I might see something new in them (Inquirer 4).

Some members of the Co-operative Inquiry group found when using this method that participants’ first experience of being introduced to Visual Inquiry could evoke both surprise and scepticism if their previous experience of responding to a question had been purely verbal means.

I’ve seen how people can initially be doubtful of the point of using the image cards, when this happens I think it’s important that I trust the process. I’ve also seen how people who were initially sceptical can change their minds and ask for them (image cards) to be used (Inquirer 2).

This required the inquirer to champion the approach; by acknowledging it was a different way of doing things and encouraging people to ‘give it a go’. Other writers have suggested that being an experienced facilitator is paramount to the success of using images (Gong et al., 2012). There was a desire within the Co-operative Inquiry group to offer a description of Visual Inquiry of sufficient detail and breadth that those reading may feel that this method is possible for them in their context, regardless of previous experience.

In summary, the overall findings of the Co-operative Inquiry group suggest that the Visual Inquiry approach facilitates connection with participants own experiential knowing and also connection with the people in the group (inquirer and participants). It fosters evocative participation through discussion which stretches and stimulates participants to go in new directions. It also illuminates deeper understanding and appreciation both of one’s own experience and that of another’s. The approach is seen as accessible and valuable to those at all stages of the learning journey from novice to expert. Visual Inquiry adapts a stance that leans more towards improvisation rather than resolute rules in how the technique is enacted. An example of this leaning towards improvisation and being provocative in Visual Inquiry, is the encouraging of participants
in the technique to try it out themselves in their own settings. This improvisational approach has led to the spread of this method in health, social care and academic settings across Scotland. The approach is conducive to further exploration and experimentation in a wide range of situations and is a good resource for opening up dialogue for both expert and novice facilitators (inquirers).

**Strengths and possibilities**

The quality of the Co-operative Inquiry was enhanced by the collective insights into use of the method and by sharing how experiences differed or assimilated with others. Inquirers brought their own individual ‘beliefs’ about the validity of this method, together with the opportunity to challenge and defend why it was used. Done collectively as a Co-operative Inquiry group, this supported the criticality in the analysis of the data generated and aided insight into their own practice with this method. Its strength lies in the generative capacity, whereby previously held assumptions are questioned and new possibilities for the future are unearthed (Bushe and Kassam, 2005). A new possibility for the use of visual methods in research/facilitation was found to lie its ease of use by those previously unexperienced in this area. The variety of experience and ‘skill’ of each group member within this Co-operative Inquiry demonstrated the benefit of the Visual Inquiry methods to those new to research or dialogue facilitation.

Questions that members of the Co-operative Inquiry group remained curious about with regard to using the Visual Inquiry method was how widely this, or similar methods with images, are being used in the area of research/education/practice development. There was also a curiosity around the potential effect that the choice of images in the pack may have on the information elicited, and how the participant’s cultural, age and socio-economic contexts may influence their engagement with the images. This curiosity then led to group members wondering about the decision-making process for choice of images when developing a new set of generic images. The question that arose was how choices of images might best reflect and respect the diversity of participants and contexts within which the images may be used.
There is scope to carry out a more systematic account of participants experiences with using them in different contexts. It is widely written that this method invokes a different response than may be the case if images were not used and so it may be useful to question how we understand which if either of these (with or without image) is the ‘truest’ representation of the persons thoughts/feelings/ experience. While no further studies are planned by the Co-operative inquiry group, there is a strong commitment to ongoing reflection and learning from the process of using this method as part of our development as facilitators. A particular aspect of Visual Inquiry that has been forefronted in this article is the promotion of an improvisational approach to this method, which includes facilitators encouraging participants to try out this method in their own setting. Again the Co-Inquiry group members have anecdotal stories of the successes reaped from this approach, this however would also benefit from a structured evaluation of the outcomes of ‘novices’ using this method.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to explore the experience of using Visual Inquiry across a range of health and social care settings and amongst inquirers with varying levels of facilitation practice. This knowledge about the experience of the inquirer/researcher is not been found in the literature. Ways in which this method can expand the application of visual methods in research, teaching and practice development were outlined. Members of the Co-operative Inquiry group reflected on how Visual Inquiry was accessible, promoted engagement and gave a voice to those who might otherwise experience difficulty expressing their views. Relational and contextual meanings were also explored and a number of key themes emerged from the reflections of the Co-operative Inquiry group: ‘evocative participation’ and ‘illumination’. Findings suggest that using Visual Inquiry influenced relationships in a positive way, facilitating dialogue, meaning making and creating connections. This in turn can help to reduce power imbalances, moving understanding to a deeper level, encouraging trust and safety, and shedding light on experiences both cognitively and emotionally. Moreover, Visual Inquiry is not simply a source of information; it is a resource which can assist inquirers to hold assumptions lightly, making visible the invisible and uncovering authenticity. Suggestions for future research include exploration of the use of visual methods in
stimulating dialogue by practice-based (rather than research or teaching) personnel, further improvisational approaches to the use of the method and measures which could support them in feeling confident to use these methods in their working lives.

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