

Teaching Visual Methods During COVID

Suzanne Culshaw

Hello, I'm Dr. Suzanne Culshaw. I'm a research fellow in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire.

Suzanne Albary

Hi, my name is Dr. Suzanne Albary, I use she/her pronouns. And I'm a senior lecturer in Business Research Methods at Suffolk Business School, University of Suffolk. So Suzanne was due to come in to help me teach visual research methods to MBA students in March 2020. And unfortunately, the lockdown obviously stopped that from happening. And that provided a really interesting opportunity needing to switch teaching and delivering visual research methods in an online space. So this conversation is about how we went about doing that. Some of the lessons that we learned, some of the challenges that we had about both teaching and doing visual research methods online, and some of the things that we can take forward into our future practice. So Suzanne you actually had a research project on the go at the time of lockdown, didn't you?

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, yep. So I'm part of a European project called Enables. And we're looking, the short version is that we're looking at how arts-based and embodied methods can help strengthen distributed leadership in schools. And the plan was always to use collage as the art space method. It's something I've used in my research before, face-to-face, in person, with box of materials and things. And I know that when I was supposed to be coming here for the session, last year, I was going to bring boxes with me. And we were going to get very hands-on and do stuff in person. And the pandemic arrived. And we switched very quickly. And to... using collage online, which was really exciting because I had all these kind of notions of...but how is it going to work? And we thought about it quite long and hard. And then we had a go. So as a team of researchers, we had a go at doing collage kind of, at our workstations, but via Zoom. And yeah, noticed a couple of things, which I'm sure we'll, we'll talk about. But yeah, so we've taken it online. And actually now, I think there are some real benefits of doing collage, which is my kind of specialism online, so I'm looking forward to... really looking forward to talking about it, a bit more today.

Suzanne Albary

Excellent. So obviously, you are going to come in and actually help me deliver a session teaching MBA students and exploring how we can use visual methods in the classroom, but also how we can use that, how they can use that in their management projects and their dissertations. And it was my first foray really into using visual methods. I dabbled a little bit with the photos, teaching in photo elicitation. But other than that, I hadn't really done anything. And then as soon as you were no longer able to come in, I had to completely rethink how I was going to teach physical research, physical research method online, and make it interesting, engaging and not, not, it not just be about talking about how to do it.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, yeah.

Suzanne Albary

Because that's the... that's the...

Suzanne Albary

Yeah, yeah. There was a very physical part of doing in-person Visual Research Methods. And I know there's a long history of doing online digital, digital methods, things like photo diaries, video diaries, that kind of thing. But really, what I wanted to do was something kind of in-person, using your hands. Yeah, you know, working with people. And one of the first things I did often, you not being able to come in, was do a podcast with you.

Suzanne Culshaw

The physicality of it. Yeah.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, we did, didn't we?

Suzanne Albary

Which was very interesting. And it was a really, I thought, engaging conversation and something that obviously this is almost evolutional. And the students really liked it.

Suzanne Culshaw

Oh did they?

Suzanne Albary

They really liked that being able to hear something that was a little less formal than a lecture. And I think we were able to capture a little bit more about that physicality in the conversation than we would have done if we were just delivering a lecture.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. Yeah. That's interesting, isn't it? That kind of, we were talking before the recording started, when we had that kind of presentations and being presented to, I think, I think this, the idea of an organic conversation like this feels perhaps a little bit more human, a little bit more personal. Yeah, I really enjoyed doing that podcast. And that was really good because it was, it was a really useful opportunity to think and talk out loud about, you know, kind of something I feel really strongly about, you know, visual methods, creative methods, arts-based methods, you know, they kind of come under the same umbrella, don't they? Have been part of my life now for the last five years or so. And, you know, I really do believe that they are powerful and they do, my little strapline is, you know, collage does funny things to people because it can reveal things that you maybe weren't anticipating. And there's a little bit of a... attention there, isn't there, when you're kind of encouraging or facilitating those kinds of methods that ,will people reveal things that they might not otherwise have done? Well, we don't know, do we? But so, ethically, there are some some considerations. I mean, but there are with all research methods, aren't

there, you know, when you meet someone in person or online for, for an interview, you know, there are, there are ethical considerations there as well. So, I don't want to over egg that, really, but I do think that they can, they can unsettle people, these kind of methods can unsettle, and I've, I've often wondered why that is really, and I'm and I don't know, but I wonder whether we're just not used to being, I'm gonna say playful. You know, and I think it is that kind of, there's something very tactile and physical about moving things around, the particular kind of collage that I've been using is where you can move things around and tend not to stick things down. And there's something quite playful about that. And perhaps we adults have kind of unlearned that?

Suzanne Albary

We have certainly lost some of that playfulness, I know when I'm talking to about visual methods to my students, and they are Business students, their Masters in Business Administration, they often start the session on visual methods, or creative methods with a kind of, oh, this is this is sweet, but it's not something that I can use in my organisation, in my business. And then by the time we get to the end of the session, they're like, I had no idea that it can be used in, in such a way. I had no idea about the things that I could do with visual methods. And I remember one session I did. So I was doing rather than collage, I was teaching, the very first session of visual methods I taught online, I did photo elicitation.

Suzanne Culshaw

Right yeah.

Suzanne Albary

And I, I posed them a question. And I put up a padlet board and I said, 'Okay, so you got 10 minutes, go off onto the internet, the wonders of the internet, and find some pictures that you feel really represent your answers to these questions'. And they looked at me as if I was mad. And then they did a bit of googling. And then suddenly, you know, one or two photos appeared, and then one or two more, and then all of a sudden, the floodgates opened, and lots and lots of photos were appearing on this padlet board. And I was like, 'Wonderful. Thank you very much. This is great. I'm going to spend a few minutes, you can watch me do this. I'm going to organise these into what I feel like a some theme.'

Suzanne Culshaw

That's interesting. So you like...kind of modelled it live?

Suzanne Albary

Yeah.

Suzanne Culshaw

That's really interesting.

Suzanne Albary

To show them how you might do that. Yeah. And then then it was a kind of, okay, so we're going to take some of these themes, and we're going to talk about them. And I'm going to talk about what I think is there. And then I'm going to ask you, if you're happy to talk about, if one of these or more photos

were yours? And am I even close? So I would talk through one of the themes, and they would say, oh, no, no, no, that's not what I meant by that.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, yeah.

Suzanne Albary

And I was like, that's fine. That's absolutely, that's absolutely brilliant you've told me that. And this is one of the things that we need to remember when we're doing visual methods is to go back to our participants and just clarify with them, if what we're pulling out of that is, in fact, what was there, what they meant by that?

Suzanne Culshaw

I think that's really critical, actually. That's that whole kind of whose meaning is it. And I call them kind of the collage creators, you know, and I, I can look at a collage that's created by somebody else. And imagine what I might kind of interpret it as, but I think that involving the creator, or the, the person who chose the photo in your instance, I think that's really important, isn't it? Because it is, there's... something spoke to them. So I think that's right. But isn't it interesting that sometimes people don't actually immediately know why they chose something or what they meant by it, but actually by offering a possible interpretation, then it it can then spark? Oh, yes, that is what I think or oh, no, you know what, that's not that at all. But that stimulus, I think, minor researcher in this, in this instance, I think can be really useful. Because, you know, otherwise, they may not know what they thought, so that they're kind of dropping in those stimulus questions, I think can be really useful. Yeah. Fascinating. That's really interesting, actually, because I think some people really kind of struggle to start with with the process. And it's interesting what you said about the Padlet. And how, you know, maybe one courageous person put a photo in and then that kind of, there's almost like a permission, isn't there? Ah, right. There's one in there. I now know the kind of thing. I've tended not to show images of kind of previously created collages to people before until we've done it online. So I, in person, I just say oh use the materials that you've got here, you know, to express and then whatever the research question is. And, and online, I've kind of tended to show a couple of collages just to say, you know, these are the kinds of things other people have created. And it's interesting, isn't it, because I don't want to show like a template, it's not a, this is what you've got to do. This is just, and I try and show a real diversity of image, you know, sometimes that just kind of look like just things on a piece of paper. And sometimes there's kind of a shape to it, you think, 'oh, that could be a person or that could be a head or whatever'. So there's, there's a decision to be made, isn't it? About whether you show something or model it, or not, or just leave people up to it. And it's really interesting. Yeah.

Suzanne Albary

So when you're actually doing these collages? Are they using an online platform? Or are they in like... a person has equipment or stuff?

Suzanne Culshaw

It's a really good question, because we thought about that, we thought long and hard about whether to send stuff. And, and I wonder what that was all about, really, because there's a kind of a control there,

isn't there, over what the items were and kind of pre determining what, what we want them to use. So the Ethics Committee just didn't allow us to send stuff in the post, which is fine, really, I guess. Because we then asked our participants to select some items, I kind of call them general bits and bobs, because I don't like to be too prescriptive, but I said, you know, maybe stationery items, or craft items, bits of ribbon, buttons, if you've got that kind of thing lying around. And so we sent the same kind of standard text out to all our participants and said, you might like to have a think about what items you'd like to have around you, before we do the collage. But no, so we didn't send anything out, we didn't know what people would have. And that was really interesting. And for the first time, I've kind of freed myself up from thinking I had, I had to, I just didn't think I've thought about it before, I wasn't pre determining the the items that people were using. And it was amazing to see. So we had about 20, just just over 20 participants in total in small workshops about four at a time. And it was amazing what they were using, you know, some people just used post-its and kind of layered them up and kind of put them in different places. And then other people had paper clips and bits of ribbon and all kinds of... so it was really interesting to see the kind of items. And what I thought was interesting was that there was some personal items coming in. So you know, things that people have on their desk, perhaps, like a paperweight or something like that. And somebody talked about they like the heaviness of... the actual item was heavy in it, it represented for them feeling weighed down. So it was really interesting to see what people brought to the table to literally, to their table, in order to create a collage.

Suzanne Albary

That's a really good point, isn't it, around... we used to provide these things. But even, even that provision in that, in that, in that way, feels like you're... with hindsight and with a bit of reflection almost was like you're confining-

Suzanne Culshaw

I know!

Suzanne Albary

-people to a particular set of materials.

Suzanne Albary

Whereas, you know, I'm thinking now about the kinds of things I might do if I was to do this, well I'd definitely be going out into my garden picking up some pretty little stones, maybe some leaves that are there, you know, all of these different things that perhaps haven't appeared in-

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah!

Suzanne Culshaw

Yes, exactly.

Suzanne Albary

In the collage you've done before.

Suzanne Culshaw

And I did some in person collage recently, actually, it was the first time since since kind of the pandemic restrictions have been lessened, shall we say, and I didn't, there were boxes, there were predetermined boxes, but people did go outside. And that was really interesting when you mentioned that picked leaves and brought... and things like that in, for some of their collages. And one woman there said that she was glad that there was a box of stuff because she'd done a session with me earlier on in the year online. And so she got both experiences, really interesting. And she had had to choose her own items and she'd really struggled. So she liked having some predetermined items, so maybe, maybe what we're learning from this is to have some and then to allow some flexibility. I mean I always did that with my doctoral participants, one in particular wanted to use and I... several items of his, for his collage and of course you know, why would, why would that not be okay, of course it's okay. But most tended to kind of just confine themselves to what was in the box and it's a very nice box and there's some very nice shiny things. But, yeah, I think that natural, I think that's really interesting what you're saying about natural items. Yeah.

Suzanne Albary

But also what is you're saying about personal items. I mean, you and I might be sitting there thinking actually maybe a ring.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yes.

Suzanne Albary

Maybe not. One I might be worried about particularly losing, but you know, you take the items off your person and put onto the paper, I mean, that... items that mean something personally to you have a different impact on the results of your data collection. Yeah, then something that I've taken out of a box that doesn't belong to me that I've never seen before until that day.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. And I might potentially be giving back and that person takes away. Yeah, that's the interesting thing, isn't it? Yeah. And I think, yeah, I think that, you know, there are other methods, aren't there? Where you can ask a participant to bring, so an artefact, yeah, that kind of means something to them. And I was involved in a session recently, actually, where I obviously haven't got the memo, because I was a presenter, but everybody else in the room had been asked to bring something with them. And it was really powerful, this kind of bring something personal. And so because I was doing the collage with them later on, I then, I mean, this is in person now. But I said to them, well, if you feel moved to use that personal artefact that you talked about earlier on in your collage, then please do and some people did. So that's a really nice kind of combination of bringing one thing as a stimulus for a conversation, perhaps, to then using it as a wider expression of an experience or an issue or a challenge.

Suzanne Albary

I think that's a really, that's a really important point. And something that I try and talk to my students a lot when we're talking to, using and talking about research methods generally, is that one method isn't

necessary, it doesn't necessarily sit in isolation. So you're talking about kind of the Venn diagram of an object interview.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yes.

Suzanne Albary

We're gonna give it-

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah.

Suzanne Albary

Its formal typing out an object interview, and then visual methods, you're creating methods in collage or arts-based methods, or there's another phrase for it.

Suzanne Culshaw

Creative?

Suzanne Albary

Craft. Craft.

Suzanne Albary

Craft. Craft-based.

Suzanne Culshaw

I like the phrase craft-based actually.

Suzanne Albary

I remember I think, when we had the conversation in the podcast, actually, the difference between arts-based and craft-based, art being, you know, people of a certain level of, for example, talent, create art, and then craft is available to everybody. So there's, there's almost a perception difference between them, isn't there? But no, I think it's really interesting what you're saying there about people being able to bring their own items and their own personal items, things that might have meaning later upon, meaning upon, you know, into something like a collage.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. Can I come back to something you said earlier on, when we were talking about your students and how they kind of were a bit sceptical. That's kind of what I heard, you said, that you're a bit sc.. But by the end, they kind of realised something. And I'm just wondering about how important it is to create the conditions to allow that, allow people to feel safe enough to kind of engage. So what was it that you think you did with those students that allowed them to dip their toe into the creative methods or visual methods waters?

Suzanne Albary

I think that's a really good point. And one of the things that I was really clear about is that there is a level of reflection needed. But personal reflection, you know, you you're not going to be 100% objective, when you come to the table when you're using qualitative methods generally, let alone something like visual methods, because we all have different perceptions based on the colour red or a particular type of object. And it's absolutely okay for you not to be fully, scientifically, quantitatively subjective. And one of the really nice things I find about teaching research methods, particularly to master students is they tend to be quite small cohorts, they've all, they come to me, at the end of the programmes, or just before they're about to embark on a piece of very independent study, a dissertation, they've known one another for a while. So there is already a kind of a group dynamic, they, they know what they, if they trust one another, they've worked together before. And they're all professionals. And I always start those sessions, or I will start the kind of the discussive part of those sessions by discussing, discussing one of my own images, and I'll ask... I've put an image on there. And I'll ask them, what do they think about this image? I'm more than happy for them to say, basically, whatever they want, you're absolutely right. When I put that image on there, that's what I meant. Or, actually, when I put that image on there, it's not about what, what you might think, it's about this and I'm quite open with my students about my experiences in the image, why I put particular images, so for example, on the, on the, on the padlet board. And one of the things was getting spent more time with my partner, and at the time, my partner hadn't felt very well, so I was like, I like being at home. I like being able to check in with him to make sure he's okay. And a lot of my students had already known that because they've seen I was out of office, they know that I'm working a little bit odd hours. And that level of openness, honesty with my students and letting them see a little bit of that vulnerability, it really opens the door for them to feel that way in that space and for them to feel that way towards me. I'm not saying that you have to be vulnerable with your students. But I have, I do think you need to set a level of expectation about what's safe in that space.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's really important. Something that we gave a lot of thought to actually in terms of our online workshops for the project that I mentioned earlier on, because actually asking people to engage like that, is it can, can make you feel quite vulnerable, can't you, can't it? And, and we were, we were dealing with people who, on the whole, didn't know each other. And so we were inviting people to online workshops from across the country. And, you know, just one aside, I think, by being online, it meant people could attend these and participate in these workshops, from very diverse kind of, you know, geographically very diverse regions, which they may not have been able to do otherwise. Anyway, we kind of had to create what we've called an 'aesthetic environment' to allow people to feel safe. And that was, that was quite challenging in some ways. Because, you know, you didn't know whether the people were going to feel comfortable with each other. But, but in some ways, using Zoom helped, because we said to people, you know, if you want to have your camera off, you can and I think we've kind of learned to, to be, to be different online than we maybe would be in person. And just one thing we found when people were doing their collages is, and as a researcher, I think I can't see you doing it, I'd like to see you doing, I'd like to see when you put things down or whatever. So you kind of have to step away from that, because you tend not to be able to see the process of the collage creation. Because they've either got the camera off, or the way that their laptop set up in image, you can't see the desk in front of them. But there's an intimacy there, in a way, they can kind of just be very

much focused on the process, particularly if they've chosen to have their camera off, which means they're not looking over their shoulder at others, they're not kind of comparing themselves with 'oh, gosh, I like your collage, mine's not very good', that kind of, that kind of, almost like a performative aspect of doing something like this. So in some ways, these these workshops allowed people to have a fairly intimate space with themselves. And then they were invited and I think that's the key word, they were invited, if they felt comfortable to do so, to share their images. So they would you know, it's possible, isn't it, to screenshare. And we would then see a photograph of their collage, and then they have the opportunity to talk to it, and others had an opportunity to respond to it. And so it was just a nice small, never more than four participants. And me as the facilitator or one researcher in the room to never more than six people in a Zoom room. And it was amazing how intimate it felt. But we'd given a lot of thought to kind of, and I could quote, I think it's Sutherland 2012, 'aesthetising the environment', as it's called, making it feel like an environment in which you feel safe and prepared to be a little bit vulnerable. So yeah. But it's a risk, isn't it? It feels like a risk asking people to do and you know, I remember one particular, one participant in particular, really said, 'I'm not sure how to get started on this'. Now in person, what would I have done, I would have taken them aside and kind of talk to them quietly. And say so you might like to think about, you know, what kind of materials have you got, you know, what does it, have you got an image in your mind you'd like to use as a starting point. Whereas online, you feel, you're quite visible? And that kind of going aside? I'm not sure. I'm not sure that was as easy to do.

Suzanne Albary

It's much less subtle. You can go into a different Zoom Room.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, I could have done but in the moment, I don't, I didn't feel that I could respond in that way.

Suzanne Albary

And you become very... you separate them then. And they become very, they're almost highlighted in a way.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah.

Suzanne Albary

They wouldn't necessarily be in person. I think that is definitely something you need, you need to..

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah.

Suzanne Albary

We need to think about, like setting someone aside.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. So what I did was I asked the other workshop participants to switch off the sound on their laptops, while I was having this kind of little conversation with this person. That's not ideal. But in the moment, I had to do something because I think it was the difference between this person giving it a go and not giving it a go. And so that, but it felt I felt on his behalf, that he was being even more vulnerable than he needed to be because we were doing it fairly publicly, as it is either. He said afterwards that it was really helpful that I'd given him kind of some some pointers. But that's interesting, isn't it? I think other people engaged because perhaps they were more predisposed to engaging anyway. And I think that's something that, that I think, you know, bringing to the conversation now is that, who is attracted to these kinds of methods, and why are they attracted? So I'm not gonna answer necessarily to these but who's attracted to these methods? And why do people choose to participate in things like we were doing for Enables? And I mean I haven't really got the answer to that. But there were a lot of women, there were a lot of women in participants and very few men. And I don't know what to make of that. And you know, there were some art teachers, where you, you talked about art earlier on, didn't you? And I think it's interesting that I wasn't asking them to be, or to create art, I wasn't even necessarily asking them to be artistic. But it's engaging in that kind of creative process. But I think, you know, methods like this can conjure up, you know, fears or memories of art at school, for example, and I wasn't very good at art, or I can't draw and those kinds of things. And although it isn't drawing, it's a, it's a very different kind of process. I think it can bring up those kind of memories for some people. And so, yeah, I think that, that you've reminded me of the craft-based phrase. And I think, going forward, I quite like that really.

Suzanne Albary

And you've also got that challenge, haven't you? Because back to what you were saying earlier about it being a little bit more playful. And in particular context, people not thinking, 'Well, I don't do that'. I mean, all... looking at these methods as being less valid.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. Yeah.

Suzanne Albary

So one of the people that I spoke to in on my podcast originally was saying, they were doing, they did visual methods, they were doing sketches, and one of the participants was 'no, I'm not going to do that'.

Suzanne Culshaw

Okay.

Suzanne Albary

By the end of the thing, they'd created quite a nice little sketch. But the start of the question was 'no, I'm not going to do that'. And I think, you know, we need one, be quite sensitive to the fact that, you know, some people aren't going to want to engage either to begin with or at all. But also, there's this, there's this perception that some of these methods maybe aren't quite as valid as other methods. And I think it's... we are getting past that, I think, yeah. And a festival like this has been like, this is a really good way of doing it. I don't think anyone who's listening to this will be thinking that way. But what are some of the things you make sure you do to ensure the validity of the work that we're doing?

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, it's a really good question. Because, I mean, it's, I guess it's what role do the methods play in the bigger picture when you're doing research, for example. And, I mean, I, I have often thought that the collages are data in and of themselves. And I do think that, but actually, we, we also tend to ask people, I've always tended to ask people to talk to their collages, and to kind of explicitly say what things mean. And so in a way, that's starting to get a little bit of validity, and kind of not bringing too much of my interpretation to it. And going back to what I said earlier about the meaning residing really with the creator of the, of the collage. But so that's one way of kind of triangulating between what, what the collage might say, and what they say in their verbal data. But there are ambiguities. I mean, you know, and you know, research is messy, isn't it? Qualitative research is messy anyway. And so I'm reminded, this wasn't an online session, but I'm reminded of an in-person interview that I did with somebody, and they presented a particular image in their collage. But that really didn't come up in the kind of the spoken interview. But you don't have to bring those two things together, because we're complex beings, aren't we, and that was part of this person's story and lived experience. And what they spoke about was also part of their lived experience. And so it's, I think it adds a richness, it makes it more difficult, because, you know, some, some of us quite like, you know, boxes to put things in and quantify. But actually, that's not what it's about. It's about a rich story. It's a narrative and the visual aspect of this person's story was very strong, as was their verbal story. So, you know, I think that we have to be open to the fact that we're not just getting people to do pictures, and then we're going to analyse them and nothing else. It's the interacting with. And I also think that my interpretation of those pictures has, has a place. So I am, I think I am able to, and it is okay, if I bring my meaning and my interpretation to those collages, but it's how we then write about it and how much kind of... we place an, what's the word, emphasis on whether it's true or not, you know, that's not what we're saying. We're saying, this is someone's story. This is my interpretation of someone's story, how I offer it up to be read by other people, and it's for them to gauge whether it feels plausible, or yeah, real enough. So I don't know if that answers your question.

Suzanne Albary

And I think, you know, you make a good point isn't it? It's part of, the part of the narrative. And if even if the visual method set part of the research doesn't connect in the interview with the verbal part, it's still an important part of the process, because someone has taken time, consideration, thought, reflection to create them that maybe made them think about things a little bit differently, made them think about things in a little bit more depth in different ways that they can then articulate after having done that.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, I think, I think that's a very good point. That's kind of the revelatory nature of it. So it may be that, it may be that it's part of the.. that process isn't it, to kind of starting to think about, you know, I'm almost struggling now to put things into words, and some experiences can't immediately be, be articulated in that way. And I think it's a different way of thinking, you know, I can't remember the direct quote now. But you know, it's about visual thinking rather than linguistic thinking. And it's an opportunity for, for some people to think differently. I was talking to somebody the other day, who told me that they think in pictures, and I mean, I tend I don't think I do, I think, I think in words really. And it was really interesting that they engaged very easily with the collage, because that's kind of almost their preferred way of

thinking. And they use their collage to then, I mean, they're a school leader, and that they're then putting their school improvement plan into words on the basis of a collage. And I think that it's just really interesting to be able to allow people to think in a way that that they can access. And I think that that says something, doesn't it about the privileging of the spoken or the written, in particular the written word, and I think that's something I feel more and more strongly about is that actually, the spoken word is not, you know, the only, only way to elicit meaning.

Suzanne Albary

I think that's a really good, really good point, particularly if you think, once you've said something, it's been said, and you can't unsay that. And once you've said something, it tends to solidify, in a way that becomes very rigid, whereas on a piece of paper, where you've got a movable collage, you can explore problems, move things around, before you get to that point of solidifying in the written or spoken word. Yeah.

Suzanne Culshaw

Which is why I'm a bit anti-glue, if I'm honest, because I mean, I'm not saying don't stick things down. You know, it's not for me to say don't, but I do question why people want to stick things down. You know, I said to somebody, just last week, I said, they said, Is there any glue? And I said, yes there is, because there was, I said, 'would you like to kind of share with me why you might like to stick this particular aspect of your experience down'? And they can't always answer that question, you know, that kind of, and if you're dealing with teachers in particular, I mean, I work a lot with teachers and school leaders, you know, they kind of want to be told what to do. I think that's another, another, yes, that's another angle of the conversation is they want to be told what to do. They want to know whether, how long they've got to do it. That's another really interesting, 'How long I have to do this? and 'Is there any glue?' That's kind of, I don't know what that says about teachers.

Suzanne Albary

Your three questions.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, the three things yeah. Yeah. Is there a right way to do it? Have you got any glue? And how long have I got?

Suzanne Albary

I think that's really, a really interesting point.

Suzanne Culshaw

But it's interesting, isn't it?

Suzanne Albary

Is this the right way to do it? Because one of the conversations that we always end up having in the classroom is there are no right and wrong answers. And you know, you might put up a photo that doesn't fit into any of these themes, or any of these boxes that we've been talking about or I've looked at a photo and I've gone I have no idea where that would fit. I'm going to need someone to explain that

to me. Would the person that posted up be happy to do that? And not... invariably they are. Okay, that makes more sense to me. Now, I can either put that in a box or actually that's that still makes more sense. But I'm going to leave it sitting on its own and all but it's not part of one of the themes. I'm like, ah, yes, but this is about coding data. It doesn't need to necessarily be, it can be one of the outliers. There are no right or wrong answers in qualitative research generally, let alone in something so creative.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. I think too. It's sometimes those outliers that become the most interesting kind of things, isn't it? And it's not about you know, I've got three of these and three in this box or whatever. Sometimes it's those singular examples, I think, that become the most interesting, really interesting.

Suzanne Albary

I've got a bit stuck in doing rather than what we're actually supposed to be talking about.

Suzanne Culshaw

I am just wondering..Yeah go on.

Suzanne Albary

So as we move beyond, to the next stage of doing research and teaching these kinds of research methods, what are some of the key lessons that you will be taking forward into your practice?

Suzanne Culshaw

From having done more online? Yeah, I think it's a real, it's been a real beneficial experience, really, it's opened my mind up to a lot of things. So I know we've talked about this a little bit before. But this whole idea of not having a box that I own, I loaned out to somebody for a little while, and then they give back. And I think that's, that's been a real eye opener, this kind of kind of being a little bit more flexible with the items that I can provide, perhaps, but that, that others can, can bring to the process. I think that's been really useful. What I said earlier about this notion of having your own space to do the collage, I think that's, that came up with one of our participants who said, if they'd been in a big room with others, they don't think they would have felt as free to express themselves. And this kind of turning the camera off and having time and space to do it and not be observed. I think that, I think that's a really interesting aspect that I haven't thought about. But I think, I think there's something in there. And I'd quite like to think about that further. I think the ability to engage, if you're, I don't know, in an island in Scotland, or in the Isle of Wight, or somewhere in between, in here in the UK, I think that's been amazing, because it's allowed people to come together to connect and to share in the creative process. You know the people who wouldn't have met otherwise, they've engaged in a research kind of activity. But for them, it's also been a learning activity, which I think has been really interesting. So they wouldn't have met otherwise. And actually, it's, it's allowed me to see that you can do these things that I think I just assumed had to be in person. And we've had the opportunity now to do it with small groups, we've done it with larger groups, there were about 25 people in one of our final workshops. And so it's just about being open to the fact that you don't have to pick it up and do it exactly like it was in person and then do it online, there are differences that you have to accommodate like you can't see the the full process. And I used to really quite like watching the full process. But there are ways around that. So some participants

chose to photograph their collage in different stages. So after a few minutes, they photograph it and then photograph it and you know, and then you can notice whether things can either move position, or things have been added or taken away. So there are ways around it. But I think the mistake you make is to think you would do exactly what you do in person. It's bit like teaching, isn't it and teaching online generally, and lift it up, and then just just do it on Zoom or whatever. Yeah, I mean, I liked the whole screen sharing and all that kind of thing. I think that worked really efficiently. You know, and, and on a very practical level with, you know, with a research kind of hat on, recording in Zoom is a dream because you know, the, the transcripts are not perfect, but you know, it's a lot better than sitting there and typing stuff up. So you've got a ready made transcript. And you've got various different formats of recording. So you can have speaker view, and gallery view and all those kinds of things. So I think you know there's, there's a lot that we can learn from having done stuff online.

Suzanne Albary

Absolutely.

Suzanne Culshaw

So what about you? What are your thoughts on it?

Suzanne Albary

I think, for me, it's definitely around that flexibility. You know, I had students this year who were remotely from India, and obviously that, that comes with its own challenges, as you will know. But being able to teach online, has been a really, really good experience for me. I've quite enjoyed it. And I hope that my students have quite enjoyed it. And I think when it comes to visual methods, I think one of the key things for me in terms of teaching these kinds of research methods and to be fair, most research methods that I've embedded a really practical element is one, it has to there has to be a practical element. It's online teaching, it's going to be challenging, it needs to be interactive, and enjoyable and, and it's a lot of ways playful, more so than if I was teaching in person. I think...

Suzanne Culshaw

That's interesting, isn't it ?

Suzanne Albary

That's been really important to keep students engaged, interested and feel like they're doing something that's not a nine to five job as well because they are learning and I want them to feel like they're learning and not just doing work. And the other thing I really found was checking in a little bit more regularly online. So when we've set these kinds of activities about going off and doing these things, not only demonstrating them, so I'll put pictures on the Padlet, make sure that students could see that I was also interacting. And these, these are the ways that you do it. But also every few minutes, just saying how's everybody getting on, I'm just going to have a little bit of play, play with the system, with some of these images, I'm going to move them around a little bit. Because otherwise, in the sea of the online, people can get a bit lost. Whereas when we're in the classroom, I might not necessarily stop the whole class and go, 'Okay, I'm just going to do X', I might go up and have individual conversations with people, but I want you know, the students to feel like I am engaging in that process that they're going

through. So checking in a little bit more regularly, but obviously not interrupting the flow. And it's quite a difficult balance.

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah, yeah, I found that. I actually used to, I've got like, a meditation bell, like a nice sounding bell. And I'd kind of ring that as it kind of... look, I don't mean to interrupt, but can we, you know, how are we doing? And yeah, because otherwise, it can feel a bit, it can feel a bit sudden, kind of, because if people got the cameras off, it can completely silence. You know, whereas in a room, you would hear a rustling noise, or, you know, just shuffling around noises. And I think that silence sometimes, yeah, I didn't think I struggled with silence. But on occasions, it can seem like a long period of time. And so we used to give about 20 minutes for people to do their collages online. And you know, and if people have turned their cameras off, or whatever, you know, you're sitting there, you're thinking, very long time, sometimes, you know, there is a tendency to want to kind of check in with people or whatever, you know, 20 minutes. And then you'd come back here, kind of ring this bell and say, or you can use the chat function as well, can't you, for that kind of thing. And just say, you know, are we okay, with just a couple of minutes to go and that kind of thing, rather than kind of breaking in with noise. But I think time has a different dimension online, I think that's what I'm saying is that those 20 minutes, seem to go quite quickly when it's in person. But perhaps because there's more stimulus, kind of stimuli in a room, you can kind of notice things, whereas it's, if there's, there's no real engagement if people have chosen and it's their choice, and that's fine to turn their cameras off to do that. You kind of sit there thinking, well, I don't actually know what I need to be doing. But allowing them that space in that time to engage is what's needed. Yeah. So yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? I hadn't thought about that until now. But yeah, that time did feel quite long.

Suzanne Albary

Yeah, as you said, time moves really differently. And I think, obviously, teaching is very different than if you're actually doing the method. But that opportunity for.. to check in because when particularly when you, you say you have 20 minutes, in a, in a space, in a physical space, you would watch someone not in a wavelength. But you would be watching someone you could see if they were struggling.

Suzanne Culshaw

Exactly. That's exactly it, isn't it?

Suzanne Albary

You could see that they were kind of stuck. And you can't do that necessarily online if they've got the camera off. So that almost sort of regular checking. How's it, how's it going? Yeah. Are you.. Did anyone got any questions? You know, is it going okay? Needs to be, at least I found a little bit more formalised online. But I like...

Suzanne Culshaw

A little overt perhaps yeah.

Suzanne Albary

But I like the idea what you're doing, interacting with that, with these sort of gentle sounds?

Suzanne Culshaw

Yeah. Well, that was part of, that was part of us trying to as I quoted, I think Sutherland earlier on, this aesthetic environment. And we did think about that. And, I mean, we didn't just use collage, we used another method, which maybe won't go into too much detail now. But that was an embodied method. And so it just felt right to have this kind of gentle cry rather than this really harsh sound. Yeah, it's interesting, actually, that kind of, we use gesture. So I've talked about it just quickly, we use gesture as a method to express how you lead change. And, and that was a lot more uncomfortable for people generally than collage. So it's interesting, isn't it? We were talking about people being sceptical about collage, while they really were very sceptical about gesture. But interestingly, again, the online nature of the workshops meant that we could say to people, I would model a gesture, and they would see it. And then I said, if you fancy doing a gesture in response to this question, you can, you can either be seen, or you can just do it behind, you know, you can turn your camera off. And it meant as a researcher, I didn't have that data. I didn't see their gesture, but it was an opportunity for them to engage in something that felt perhaps a little bit uncomfortable, but they did. And then they talked about it. And for some people the opportunity to do that was really powerful. For some they just sat there and said I didn't get that at all. Well, that's okay. You can, you know, you can not get something or not enjoy it. But I think the virtual nature of the workshops allowed that kind of activity perhaps to be experienced very differently than in a room where you can be seen doing these kinds of gestures. So I haven't really thought about that until now. And we're only just writing up the report now, but, yeah, I might, I might have to think about that a little bit more about how something, when you're in a bit more of a discomfort zone. Whether actually being, you know, in your own little Zoom bubble is actually a forged, a forged, a different kind of privacy than in person.

Suzanne Albary

The opportunity for a safe space that you wouldn't necessarily have.

Suzanne Culshaw

And I think that goes for all of the methods that we talked about today really.