

Visualising Sustainability: Reflections on Applied Student Learning Through Visual-based Assessment

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Abstract

As Sontag (1979) stated, we live in an image-based world within which we are continuously bombarded with visuals in countless formats and guises. However, despite such image saturation, academic engagement whether through teaching or research continues to be restrained within the boundaries of text as the written word. While Barthes (1977) refers to the “*image as text*”, this paper suggests that such analogies to the image as a form of representation fail to capture the potential of the visual as a vehicle for learning and teaching within academic environments. Indeed, while visuals are increasingly adopted within the learning and teaching environment, examples of the use of visuals as a means of assessment remain relatively scarce. Drawing upon two innovative forms of assessment, this paper therefore seeks to explore the opportunities the visual affords for encouraging deeper reflexivity, creativity and understanding within the student experience. As students are required to understand the complexities of sustainable tourism, this paper suggests that innovative forms of visual-based assessment offer not only the opportunity for students not only to draw upon existing third-party images to support or enhance their work, but in creating their own images, students become empowered within the learning environment. Thus, visuals generate opportunity for deeper engagement and in turn, learning and understanding of sustainable tourism during their experience.

The reflections of this paper emerge from a series of observations to student experience on an international overseas fieldtrip which is run as an elective open to level two Tourism Management students. The purpose of the fieldtrip is to encourage students to experience first-hand and reflect upon the issues that are raised theoretically throughout the Tourism Management programme. While the fieldtrip explores a broad spectrum of issues faced within the tourism industry, sustainability forms the foundations of this experiential encounter in the field. The module has been running for four years. The paper draws upon the two main modes of assessment created specifically for this module. First, students are required to complete a visual reflective essay. The essay provides an opportunity for students to reflect upon what they have learned about tourism during the fieldtrip: the key issues and problems identified with tourism management and development in the areas

visited. As such, they are encouraged to discuss their own interpretations and engage in a critical analysis of the issues raised. Alongside a reflective diary students complete on a daily basis, they are required to take a series of photographs that best capture the issues they feel are pertinent to their understanding of sustainability in practice (or indeed not in practice). Students are required to include a minimum of six photographs and these should form the foundation of the arguments and critiques presented in the essay. The second form of assessment discussed is the storyboard and podcast of a key issue students identify as existing at the destination. For this element, students are required to construct a short 10-minute podcast in groups of three or four. Unlike the visual reflective essay, students are able to use a combination of personally authored and third party images, video clips and other forms of visual display.

As Schirato & Yell (1996) suggest, *“in contemporary western culture, and particularly in the youth culture, visual mediums and genres are becoming increasingly popular at the expense of other mediums, in particular the written word”*. Indeed, the primacy afforded to the text within academic environments can potentially undermine the legitimacy of the information presented in visual formats (Levie and Lentz, 1982). Therefore, while this paper does not seek to question the importance of the written text within the learning environment, it does suggest that increasing the role of the visual within such experiences provides the opportunity for increased creativity and deeper learning amongst students. It highlights the legitimacy of the visual as a vehicle for both creating and sharing knowledge. Indeed, as Myatt & Carter (1979) suggest, images may help aid understanding and learning of concepts that are difficult to explain verbally and that they are useful aids for learners with a low degree of verbal understanding. Thus, the paper suggests that while visuals can facilitate student learning within the classroom environment, it is the accessibility of the visual that allows students to become the authors of their own images and in turn use images to convey concepts, comprehension and understanding in their own work. Thus, visual-based assessment opens the potential for students to present a range of responses, which as Buzon (1993) suggests, enhances creative thinking and memory.

Secondly, the paper suggests visual-based assessment enhances reflexive learning. It argues that in creating their own visuals and visual encounters with place and practice, students must confront their understanding of particular issues. As Scarles (2009) suggests, the visual and the construction of visuals demands reflexive performance as students engage in a series of negotiations; authoring images according to their personal understanding of the issues at hand. Thus, the visuals included in assessments provide an opportunity for students to directly personalise their work, emphasising elements photographed over those omitted. With no right or wrong answer, as Crang (1997) suggests, it is not the quality of the photograph, nor the aesthetic content of the image that is important, but rather *why*

particular images have been created and included in the essay. Thus, the requirements of visual-based assessment provide the opportunity for students to map their journey through both the theoretical and empirical understandings as they have developed through the course of the fieldtrip.

Finally, despite such opportunity for learning, the paper realises several key limitations exist in using visual-based assessment methods. As Felder & Soloman (2001) suggest: *“unfortunately, most people are visual learners, which means that most students do not get nearly as much as they would if more visual presentation were used in class”*. However, despite such assertion, it would be naïve to assume all students were equally visually attuned. Rather, while many are accomplished readers of images, their role as authors often remains a source of uncertainty and at times self-doubt as for many, this is their first experience of visual-based reflection. Secondly, mirroring concerns over the academic integrity of images, such uncertainty is compounded as students question their ability to take photographs in ways that best convey the complexities of the issues raised. Thirdly and in particular relation to podcasts, students experienced varying degrees of competency with the technological requirements of the assessment. Nevertheless, while the paper addresses such limitations, it proposes the nature of such concerns serve to reinforce the initial assertions that existing assessment methods remain confined to the parameters of written text and as yet, fail to harness the full potential of visual-based learning techniques.

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