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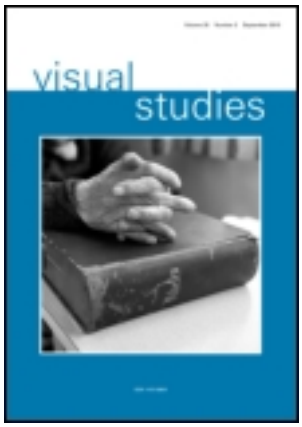

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Creative and visual methods for exploring identities

DAVID GAUNTLETT AND PETER HOLZWARTH

There seems to be a growing interest in Europe in the use of visual methodologies within social research – studies in which participants are asked to make creative artefacts within the research process. Although readers of Visual Studies *will already be familiar with techniques such as photo-elicitation, the use of video, drawing, collage, Lego and other methods remains somewhat new. At conferences we find that people are interested to hear about this work, but are also puzzled about various issues, such as how researchers can use and interpret such visual artefacts. After a train journey in which we talked through various aspects of work in this field, we felt it might be of some use to interested researchers and students if we published a dialogue about it.*

Peter Holzwarth: Could we begin with a brief outline of this kind of research – studies where participants make things – and what you are doing with it?

David Gauntlett: Well, I think I'm developing a kind of research which enables people to communicate in a meaningful way about their identities and experiences, and their own thoughts about their identities and experiences, through creatively making things themselves, and then reflecting upon what they have made. This is a process which takes time, and which uses the hands and body as well as the mind. The method should be empowering for the participants – since they have a creative opportunity to express and explore something as part of a project that is interested in what they have to say (although the idea that research studies can 'empower' participants is perhaps sometimes rather over-ambitious). But the approach is optimistic and trusting about people's ability to generate interesting theories and observations themselves. And I want to establish theoretical support for this approach, and studies which demonstrate its worth. The therapeutic value of creative activity is already well documented [see, for example, Thomas and Silk 1990; Silver 2001; Edwards 2004], but in the methods we're talking about here, the possible value for a participant is, if you like, a happy side-effect. Primarily the creative activity is the starting point for developing thoughts about personal experience and identity, which are ultimately communicated to the researcher.

PH: How did you come to be interested in this kind of approach?

DG: It stemmed from my Ph.D., which began with a rather naïve, 'media effects' kind of question about whether the greater amount of coverage of environmental issues on TV in the early 1990s, especially in children's TV programmes, had led to greater environmental awareness and concern in children. Near the start of that, I necessarily did a review of the 'media effects' literature, and found it to be extremely disappointing – full of methodological holes, inconsistencies, tricks and problems of all kinds [for examples, see Gauntlett 1995, 2001, 2005].

PH: Isn't that partly because it's almost an impossible question – to pin down the cause of one bit of behaviour as being an effect of one bit of viewing?

DG: Exactly. But researchers – especially the particular kind of American psychologists who were churning this stuff out, and seemed to be largely unchallenged – wouldn't admit this or even allude to it. Rather, they went the other way, and insisted that their data – usually weak and contrived data based on some kind of patronising study where they thought they had tricked mindless participants into revealing something – definitively and scientifically proved a 'media effect' link.

So I didn't want to do that kind of study, but I still wanted to explore my basic research question. I still think the media can be a very significant influence on people's thinking, even if it is a difficult matter to study. So I developed and tried out an alternative method. I took video camera equipment into a number of schools and worked with groups of children aged 7 to 11, over several weeks, to make videos about 'the environment' [Gauntlett 1997]. The children controlled the video camera – most had never used a video camera before. They led the production, decided what to look at and

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what story to tell. They were able to film material out of sequence, knowing that it could be edited into a different order later, which was impressive for children of this age.

PH: The children were special?

DG: No, no. They were typical kids, and most of the groups were from quite poor working-class areas of Leeds, England. What I mean is that the media literacy literature – produced mostly by psychologists who, at the time, seemed to want to put children into little boxes and developmental compartments – suggested that children of this age wouldn't be able to do that. But this study showed that they could. Therefore this work was closer in spirit to aspirational community photography and video-making projects [such as Dowmunt 1980, Lawrence 1990 and Bower 1992] than to psychology studies.

The research found various things about children's responses to the environment and how they had been somewhat shaped by the media – in particular, to simplify it rather, that children had adopted a concern with local self-help issues such as recycling, rather than a perspective which identified governments or businesses as having a responsibility to preserve the environment [Gauntlett 1997]. This could be connected with the media, as we found that media sources were the children's primary and usually only source of information on this issue; with an issue such as racism where there may be a wider range of influences, for example racist comments made by parents and peers, it would have been much harder to apprehend the input from the media.

In your work on the Children in Communication About Migration (CHICAM) project, you also worked with young people making videos. Could you explain a little about the project?

PH: CHICAM was an international action-research project, co-ordinated by David Buckingham and Liesbeth de Block at the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media at the Institute of Education, University of London [see www.chicam.net]. Researchers and media educators from six European countries enabled and analysed the production of videos and photographs by migrant and refugee children aged between 10 and 14 years old, with recent experience of migration. Videos were exchanged between groups via a special Internet platform, and the young producers received feedback from other partner groups and gave feedback themselves to others.

DG: These young people were able to make videos quite easily?

PH: Our experience was that the kids came with a lot of competencies, skills and knowledge – their cultural capital and media-knowledge referred to a range of different contexts – but we felt it was important to build on that and help them develop some systematic production skills. So in each country the researcher worked together with a media educator, who introduced filmmaking in a playful and visual way, and structured the media-educational process.

DG: And the study also produced findings about the self-identities of these migrant young people?

PH: Yes, both their media productions and their verbal expressions made clear that they had access to a broad range of media contexts such as music and TV from their original countries, from their actual countries of residence and from global media. Media from their new countries would help them to integrate by supporting language acquisition and connecting them to a web of meanings, norms and knowledge they share with other youths. Media from their former countries help them to maintain cultural and linguistic contact; whilst global media are important for making a range of identifications, not necessarily associated with any country in particular.

DG: So it's not a choice of one identity or another, but rather a dynamic mix? And they work out their own sense of place and identity, partly by drawing upon media resources?

PH: Yes, that's right. By mixing these different media resources they were able to identify themselves with global youth cultures, but also with ethnic cultures and their new countries. In this way multiple belongings or context-specific identifications can be expressed.

Now, since you did your Video Critical study, you have developed this method where people make things *as part of the research, much more.*

DG: Yes. *TV Living* [Gauntlett and Hill 1999] included a creative methodology since it was about a study in which 500 people kept diaries of their lives – including media use and media-related conversations and thoughts – for five years. So that was deeply qualitative. But, also, it relied on *language* as the single form of expression, which I've otherwise been trying to move away from. *Web Studies* [Gauntlett 2000; 2nd ed., 2004] was also about the place of a new kind of media in people's everyday lives – and about their creativity in using it; and about methods we could use to study this. But I realised that we should be developing visual creative methods much more, because I am convinced that it is a good new way of building sociological knowledge, and it offers a positive challenge to the

taken-for-granted idea that you can explore the social world just by asking people questions, in language.

The thing I like best about it is that it is an *enabling* methodology – it assumes that people have something interesting to communicate, and that they can do so creatively. That means it's basically the *opposite* of the experiments into 'media effects', where researchers seemed to assume that people had very little self-knowledge, and indeed would not be clever enough to work out the point of the psychology experiment in which they were trapped. I say 'trapped' because studies like that have predefined what they are looking for, often in a binary way: does the 'subject' give response *x*, or response *y*? The person has no opportunity to express what they feel about the issue in question, or about the experience of being in the study.

PH: What studies did you develop?

DG: Well, for example, I did a study in which young people were asked to do a drawing of a celebrity or famous person who they would like to be. Of course, they didn't necessarily want to be someone else, but they were asked to think as if they had to wake up as someone else. This was with 100 young people aged 15 to 16. The study is discussed in the second edition of *Moving Experiences* [Gauntlett 2005] but essentially I regard it as a pilot study. It led me to realise the importance of people making their own interpretations – it made that very clear. Otherwise you have all these drawings of David Beckham and Jennifer Aniston and other people, but you can't say anything about them, unless you are led by the person who made the picture. But drawings are a great way into thinking about the topic. In this case, I was constrained by what I could achieve in school classes when I should have given the participants more time, and spent more time with each participant. So that was one I really learnt from, even if it wasn't a perfect study.

I'm supervising Ph.D. students using methods like this, such as Ross Horsley, who has done an excellent study of young men and masculinities in which participants are invited to make a magazine cover which expresses their sense of identity; and Fatimah Awan, who is beginning a study of ethnic identities in the UK which involves asking young people from different ethnic communities to make collages representing how they see themselves, and how they think others see them.

And there have been some collaborations, such as one with Peter Bonnell at the Royal College of Art, where they had an exhibition called *This Much is Certain*, about documents, documentaries and how you document things. For the workshops involving schoolchildren visiting the show, we thought it would be good if they were asked to make a document of the self – which in formal terms, in everyday life, is a passport. So they made a 'Passport of Me', and they could stick in a Polaroid photograph and artistic little creations on different pages of the passport, about themselves. On the one hand it's a nice bit of self-expression, and on the other it also means you think about the limits of what you can document about yourself on paper.

PH: So these things all make use of creative/artistic approaches in different ways. Would you say your main interest is in methodology?

DG: Well, there are two dimensions to it. First there is the interest in methodologies. Someone might say it's 'just' methodology – in other words, not actually *about* anything in particular – but on the other hand, the interest in methodologies is all about how we gather and develop *knowledge* about the social world: in other words, the very heart of social science. Without a good and varied set of tools for understanding how people think about and respond to their social worlds, social science is potentially limited.

Second, it's about exploring how people think about, understand and reflect on their own identities.

PH: So to consider the methodology side first, perhaps you could summarise why you think these creative methods are advantageous?

DG: Okay, well first, most approaches to audience or social research require participants to produce *instant* descriptions of their views, opinions or responses, in language. I'd say that's difficult. Most people can't really provide accurate descriptions of why they do things, or like things – let alone their identities and motivations – as soon as you ask them. But most language-based studies capture and preserve those instant responses as 'data'. In the new creative methods, we don't do that. Instead we have a reflective process, taking *time*, so the data you end up with is the result of thoughtful reflection.

So, secondly, by inviting participants to create things as part of the research process, it's *a different way into* a research question. We don't even need to get too stuck on whether it's 'better' than another method really. It's a different way in, and engages the brain in a different way, drawing a different kind of response.

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Third, the method operates on the visual plane, to a substantial degree, matching the highly visual nature of popular culture. So you have a match between mediated experiences and the kind of method you are using to explore them.

Fourth, the method recognises and indeed embraces the creativity and reflexivity of people. As I mentioned, it's not about tricking or cornering research subjects in order to confirm a ready-made hypothesis. Instead, it offers them tools through which they can thoughtfully communicate their own meanings and understandings.

And finally, in media studies terms, this approach avoids treating individuals as a mere 'audience' of particular products. Rather than defining people as 'soap opera viewers' or 'magazine readers', this approach recognises that people receive media messages from all kinds of places, all day long, and that they somehow process all of these but do so as a whole person.

PH: You call these 'creative methods', but what about the view that generating some speech, in an interview or focus group, is also a creative act – just as creative as the methods you are talking about?

DG: Well, it's true that talk is creative too, yes, of course. But the reflective process of making an artefact, taking *time*, as well as the act of *making* something that you can look at and think about and change, is different. First, you're asked to make the thing – which might be a drawing, or collage, or video, or Lego model, or whatever – and you could think about it quite normally for ten or fifteen minutes, say, or even a couple of days or weeks, depending on the study, and then you would make the thing, and again that takes time and involves constant *engagement* with the artefact. By the time you're at the end of that process … it's quite different to being in a face-to-face session where somebody asks a question and you have to provide an answer straight away. (In some kinds of research, such as psychometric testing, you actually *want* an unreflected, 'gut instinct' kind of response, of course. But most qualitative media studies do not treat people's responses in that way; instead, people's statements are taken as being more-or-less reliable, thoughtful accounts.)

The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is significant here. Merleau-Ponty noted that most Western academic thought treats individuals as the sum of their brains. Those people have bodies, of course, but in terms of their emotions and opinions and intelligence and experience, we think of this as all being in the mind; the body is just a vehicle for this cognitive creature. Merleau-Ponty felt that this was quite wrong; that the body and mind are inseparable, and that we cannot talk about experience and perception without including the body as central to these [see Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002].

If the body is central to, or even just an important dimension of, experience – which I think it is – and if people's own creative, reflexive responses to things are important – which I think they are – then we need to work with people in ways that embrace this, rather than ignore it.

PH: Which brings us, I think, to your new project with Lego. Can you tell us about that?

DG: Lego Serious Play already exists as a consultancy process for businesses and organisations, developed by the Lego Group in collaboration with some very good academic researchers. It's not at all like the kind of business consultancy where a troubleshooter turns up, looks around, and announces what the problems are and what needs to change. Lego Serious Play begins with the idea that 'the answers are already in the room'. It gets participants communicating more fully, creatively and expressively, by asking them to 'play' in a focused way, with Lego. Specifically, team members are asked to build metaphors of their organisational identities and experiences using Lego bricks.

PH: So you don't build actual scenes from life – it's using metaphors? Isn't that difficult for people – on top of the difficulty they may have with using a children's toy as part of something 'serious'?

DG: Well, they have a very carefully thought out process, which starts with building skills, gets you making simple things in Lego, and then cleverly knocks you onto the metaphorical plane. For example, you've built a little creature, but then you're told to make changes to it within thirty seconds, to turn it into something that bothers you at work. So then someone might give the animal bigger teeth, representing overbearing senior managers; or the creature's legs might be removed, suggesting that the organisation is slow-moving; or whatever. Simple things like that move you onto a metaphorical plane without you really noticing. It's challenging too, of course, but in a positive way.

The process builds up to making models of whole organisations – in a metaphorical way. Say you work in a school. You don't build a model of the actual school, with doors and classrooms and kitchens and toilets. Instead the model might include a big flower or tree in the middle, representing learning, but then that would be connected to other parts, such as a windmill

representing creativity, for example, and a dog representing the need for discipline, as well as various other parts, and the model might be populated by children and teachers but it would be interesting to see whether they were climbing the tree or were more to be seen gathered around the dog – and we'd want to see if they are frightened of the dog or if they sit on the dog's back – and so on.

And then that in turn would be connected to other agents – models of external things that might have an influence on the school – such as the government, parents, city life, even climate change, anything. And of course it's interesting to see each of these models: for example, the government – is that represented as a bee, or an elephant, or a box with no windows, or what? There's always much to talk about with each of the constructions.

And there's more to it; in the existing version of Lego Serious Play there are different 'applications' of the method, different scenarios with different kinds of outcomes.

PH: But you're developing a social science version.

DG: Yes, my version has people building metaphors of their identities, instead of organisations. One application of Lego Serious Play already does this to some extent, but more seeing the person as part of an organisation. My version is more about identities, different aspects of personality, influences and aspirations. And this is used as a way of eliciting data – sociological information – about people's lives. So it's not just like a form of therapy for the participants – although participants frequently report that the process has helped them to think about themselves, their lives and their goals. Rather, it's an alternative way of gathering sociological data, where the expressions are *worked through* (through the process of building in Lego, and then talking about it) rather than just being spontaneously generated (as in interviews or focus groups).

PH: If a Lego construction is a metaphor for identity, how is it more than simply a metaphorical account of life events? Are we the sum of, or to put it another way, identified by, our life events?

DG: Well, the metaphorical model is not usually just about events. The participant is invited to think about who they are, the different aspects of themselves that they bring to the world, and what they think are significant aspects of their identity. So I suppose if it was someone who saw their life as the product of a series of events then they might do an entirely events-based model. But more typically people will build aspects of their 'core' – or changing – personality, plus significant external agents such as family and friends. So many models include some aspirations, some aspects of personality, some happy or unhappy bits of significant history, and concepts such as friendship, passion, travel, time, calm, ghosts, tensions … and all kinds of other things. But it certainly doesn't lead to an emphasis on events.

Incidentally we say to them: 'This task doesn't mean you have to reveal the most private aspects of yourself; you don't have to "bare your soul"; rather, you are provided with an opportunity to say, "This is how I would like you to be introduced to me"'. It would not be right to expect the deepest level of psychological revelation in four short hours, or in a group context – or any context. And the participants might feel rather exposed, and unsupported, at the end of it. So we have to be careful about that.

PH: In this Lego study – or the drawings study, or any other study like this – is the analysis based only on the visual product, and the verbal comments made by the participants about it, or does it go beyond that?

DG: I tend to think that you can't really go beyond that, or you're probably moving into the area of *imposing* interpretations onto people's work. I'm always trying to get away from the idea that an 'expert' analyst can come in and tell you what something 'really' means. I've always thought you should value the person's own view first and foremost; this was reinforced by my reading of the art therapy literature.

PH: What did you learn from that?

DG: Simply put, some art therapists in the past would refer to a diagnostic manual to give them the expert insight into what a patient's artwork 'actually' meant. It was like a pretty rigid form of psychoanalysis, where a person would be asked to draw something – like the 'house, tree, person' test where they'd be asked to draw those three things – and then a manual would tell you that a large tree meant one thing, and that a house with no windows meant something else. It's interesting, but too rigid. *Today*, I learned, art therapists are far more likely to use the drawing as a starting point for a *discussion* with the person. The participant, the patient or client, interprets their *own* drawing. Which is far better. And so on the question of interpretation, my answer is always that the interpretation has to come from the person who made the artefact. My own guesses

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or speculation about someone else's meanings are just that – guesses and speculation – so we have no use for those.

PH: But do you not think that the expertise of the researcher (reflection, distance from the topic, experience and general knowledge) and the expertise of the subject (as an expert on their own life, and specific knowledge) should be brought together in a productive way in order to develop an analysis that is neither merely based on the researcher's horizon nor only on the subject's horizon?

DG: That's interesting. My instinct is to disagree and say that the researcher shouldn't be adding in their own experience and 'expertise': the point of social research is to get as close as possible to *other people's* views and meanings, isn't it?

PH: But would that mean that a social scientist is just someone who records what people say? They must have a more intelligent role than that?

DG: Oh well, I've been talking just now about how we arrive at interpretations of *individual* artefacts made in a research project, one by one. If we rely on the makers' own interpretations, that doesn't mean that the social scientist is redundant or just recording what people say; on the contrary, they have a central role in the *overall* analysis, and in the production and articulation of theory that stems from the research. So it's not that the researcher can have nothing to say, but rather that they need to *listen* to what is said overall and then come back in at the end and develop conclusions and theory, based on an overview of all that has been created and recorded. So, to put it simply, you can do an analysis of the whole but you shouldn't be trying to analyse each creative artefact because that is better done by the person who made it.

PH: I do see the problem of imposing meanings or over-interpreting open texts according to prior knowledge, but on the other hand every creative production contains conscious or reflected and unconscious or unreflected aspects. That's why doing creative stuff can be so interesting – you produce something and later you learn that your piece contains elements you hadn't thought about and that give you new insights. Sometimes the creative subject might produce very interesting and revealing aspects that are not mentioned verbally later on. Maybe that's because some topics are inconvenient to think about – such as, say, death, illness, painful experiences – or are not socially accepted – such as sexuality. In an international research project which I worked on called VideoCulture [Holzwarth and Maurer 2001], one of the many groups was a group of disabled young people. They produced a narrative film about death and suicide. We knew about them that their disabilities meant that they would die in a few years, and they knew that, too. This wasn't mentioned verbally by them, but knowing their circumstances, this was an important aspect in the film, relating strongly to their lives. In order to make good interpretations, or avoid wrong interpretations, it's important to look for aspects in the context that might or might not support certain readings.

DG: Okay, that's clearly a good example where the context makes a difference to how you'd look at such a film. You're not really contradicting my view though, because I do think that you should talk to the participant and work out an interpretation of what they've made, which basically should be in their own words, although you can prompt this with questions. So I would say that in this case, you would ask them how the representations of death or suicide in the film connected with their own feelings about their illness and their future. Obviously it's upsetting. But it's important to get their own account of this. It would still be less good to have an 'expert' interpretation. And just because the expert knows the circumstances, such as in this case about the participants' disabilities and future prospects, that doesn't mean that the researcher will necessarily understand that lived experience in any way.

But I can agree with your idea that you draw together the researcher's horizon and the participant's horizon … as long as the participant's voice is dominant and the researcher is more of a guide.

PH: In my experience, children and young people often enjoy creative production very much, but when it comes to reflection, discussion and talking they seem to be less enthusiastic and motivated. Especially children from less academic backgrounds.

DG: Mm, well of course this can happen, and a lot of people enjoy the making somewhat more than the talking. Nevertheless, I don't think this is normally a big problem (except in a small minority of cases where you have a participant who just won't engage in discussion, and I suppose there's not much you can do there). Normally, if you listen to what the participants have to say, and respond in an engaged, enthusiastic, listening kind of way, and if you put a lot of energy into it generally, then I think people *like* to talk about what they've made and why. You need to have enthusiasm and to genuinely listen – showing the participant that what they have to say is valuable and important.

PH: What about formal aspects of the visual material, such as framing, perspective, light and composition? Are these aspects important for your analysis or only when it's mentioned by the subjects themselves?

DG: I'd only be interested in what the participants themselves say about it. It would be okay to ask them about these aspects, to see what they say. Would you want to do your own 'external' analysis of these features?

PH: When dealing with products done by professional media producers, I'd say that looking at the formal aspects is very important because it's likely that they did the framing in an intentional and conscious way. Less experienced producers often deal with formal aspects in a less conscious way, and in those contexts it would be dangerous to impose an interpretation of intentions.

DG: Indeed. Of course, I would say that with professionals and non-professionals alike, you really want to know what the producers *themselves* have to say about the work.

PH: In other projects applying visual methods, media productions are being analysed which where not produced within the process of the research at all, such as projects working with historical photographs. In these cases, asking the producers is extremely difficult or impossible – they are often dead already! What do you think of approaches like this?

DG: It's certainly good to deepen our knowledge of history – including everyday domestic social histories – by making use of visual evidence as well as documentation. It would probably be wrong to think that this is entirely new. The way in which the field of anthropology has embraced visual artefacts in recent years is clearly welcome. However, you will be unsurprised to hear that I don't believe that detailed speculation about the *intentions* behind particular image compositions can be especially useful, if it gets bogged down in the aesthetics of (rather than reasonably unambiguous information contained in) a particular image. There's just too much guessing and imagining involved – it's like if you told a stranger about one of your dreams, and their response was to tell you 'what your personality is like' based only on that dream. What they said might include some interesting elements, but would also seem to you to be frustrating, and partly wrong, and rather offensive.

PH: Nevertheless, in these historical contexts there are sometimes additional forms of data which can be included in the analysis, including archives and records, and for example Marcus Banks [2001] gives the example of a postcard sent from India in the 1940s where the text written on the back provides the primary clues about how the image was being used and interpreted by that particular person at that particular time. Existing photos can also be used to elicit memories, or opinions.

DG: Yes, I accept your examples and also I note that you are agreeing that you need additional information to guide the interpretation (!).

PH: Okay. Moving on, you said that you're interested in exploring how people think about and reflect on their own identities. What authors and concepts do you think provide a useful theoretical framework for this?

DG: I tend to prefer the models that see people as reflexive participants in life, such as the Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck models which assume that people are not entirely victims of social forces and constraints [see Giddens 1991; Giddens and Pierson 1998; Beck 2002; Gauntlett 2002]. They have knowledge about themselves and the ways in which other people live their lives – informed in part by the media – and they are affected by social constraints (such as access to resources and money, and perhaps to knowledge) and by social forces (which means, basically, *other people's expectations*) … and we accept that these can be serious constraints, but at the same time you can't have a model which only sees people as trapped, where their own thinking or behaviour makes no difference. Instead, people's own constructions of their worlds, their ideas about their lives, are very important, both in terms of how they personally get on in the world, and also in how the world is led towards change.

You get this idea in the later work of Foucault too, of course. Earlier Foucault was more about people being tied down by discourses, but in the later work he's fascinated with the ways of living life differently, of technologies of the self and personal ethics which can bring about change in your own life and then in the world. So in this way Foucault fits in very well with Giddens, and is maybe actually even more optimistic. There's that David Halperin anecdote, where he asked members of ACT UP, the New York AIDS activist organisation, to name the one book or resource that had most inspired them, and every one of them apparently said Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, volume 1 [Halperin 1995, 16].

The whole point of Foucault's sometimes baffling historical accounts, I think, is to show that life has been lived very differently, and most importantly *thought of* very differently, at different times in human history, and

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therefore to show the power of discourses and ways of thinking to change things positively. Or negatively, of course, which is maybe often dwelt on in readings of Foucault. But also – positively.

And that's why I think we need research which is able to get a full sense of how people think about their own lives and identities, and what influences them and what tools they use in that thinking, because those things are the building blocks of social change.

PH: At the start of that answer you seemed to hesitate before saying 'people as reflexive … participants in life'.

DG: Mm, yes, I was going to say 'reflexive actors', which is often used; but I don't think the idea of 'actors' is very helpful – it reminds us of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in which, as you know, people are seen as being like actors on a stage, changing their performance according to whichever 'audience' they are with at the time [Goffman 1959]. On the one hand, we know that this happens – you may speak and act differently with your parents compared with your friends, or your boss, or whoever. That doesn't get us very far though. It's not clear in Goffman what's going on behind the performances, if anything. I don't think Goffman is criticising people for being cynical, he knows it's what people have to do to get along in life, but beyond that you don't get much of a sense of what's going on in the people or what this means for society.

Which models do you like, Peter, for thinking about identities?

PH: In Germany, Heiner Keupp's concept of the 'Patchwork-Identität' (patchwork-identity) is quite important in the field of social science [Keupp 2002]. There are needles, strings, pieces of fabric, the process of sewing and the different self-made or given patterns.

DG: The idea of a patchwork seems too neat to me – I think of lots of carefully arranged squares. Isn't the idea of collage more appropriate – lots of things stuck down and overlapping, maybe more of a mixed-up mess?

PH: That's exactly what is meant with the patchwork metaphor: not a combination of aspects in a regular and clear order, but something like a collage where you might find things from different contexts that don't fit together very well at first sight. Explaining the metaphor, Keupp distinguishes between classical patchwork patterns and the 'Crazy Quilt'. Using this metaphor it's important to consider the different resources for identity construction that people do have or do not have. Pierre Bourdieu's different capital types are important here (social, economic and cultural capital). People can't freely put anything they would want into the quilt, necessarily. They may or may not have access to different kinds of resources.

DG: I see, that's a way of picturing an identity. Does it help you to understand how identities form, or change, or can be important or unimportant in social life?

PH: I think it's a helpful concept for overcoming traditional, static and monocultural notions of identity but of course it has limitations as well. It's not a very dynamic model and it stresses the conscious and reflected choices too much, but there are other less conscious aspects of identity too. It also individualizes a lot, but identity construction is a social and interactive process. But all in all, if you don't take it in a too simplistic way, it opens up more than it closes down.

Also, I think especially in the context of migration, the concept of 'multiple belongings' is important. Multiple belonging means that people do not identify with only one social cultural context but with several. Media reception in the age of globalisation makes it easy to have access to different symbolic systems from different countries.

DG: Yes, and in fact I think the idea of 'multiple belongings' is useful for all people, whether migrants or not. Modern individuals don't necessarily feel that they have one identity or place of belonging – they are more likely to have a few, even if they are all seen as interconnected and part of one whole.

PH: And now you're doing research also about learning? How does this connect with that?

DG: Well, by using creative methods to understand how people think about themselves and their identities, I do think it also helps us to understand how people learn. Projects such as the Lego research show that people think about things differently when making something, using their hands – it leads to a deeper and more reflective engagement. This applies too, unsurprisingly, in learning. In fact the Lego Serious Play idea, for example, builds on the work of Seymour Papert, whose idea of constructionism suggests that people learn effectively through *making* things [Papert and Harel 1991], through the kind of bodily engagement highlighted by Merleau-Ponty. And Lego Serious Play also makes use of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's idea of 'flow' – the idea that people learn better (and enjoy life more generally) when they are creatively challenged [Csikszentmihalyi 1990].

So there are strong connections between the creative and reflexive research methods and research into engaged and reflexive learning.

PH: You say people learn effectively through making things. But doesn't writing also count as 'making things'?

DG: Well … good point, and writing a story about something can be a good way of learning about it, for example. But constructionism is based on the idea that making a three-dimensional object, using your hands, involves a different kind of engagement.

PH: It sounds like all this has some implications for formal education in general. I think creative forms of learning take place in kindergartens and primary schools. But I think – looking at educational careers – the older you get, the less creative the forms of knowledge capture and learning you will encounter. What could these reflections on creative learning, reflection and enjoyment mean for high school and university teaching?

DG: I think you're right – the older you get, as a student, the work becomes much less playful and much more about a straightforward and logical approach to facts. That's not especially surprising because the latter approach is normally seen as the more 'grown-up', mature approach to things. I'd say that's not helpful at all. In fact, as the ideas we are learning become more complex, and we need to be more sophisticated in dealing with them, then a playful and imaginative approach is exactly what you need. Interviews I've read with leading scientists, physicists and experts in other fields, would all seem to agree with this. Many of the ideas in quantum physics, for example, seem quite mad from the point of view that we try to inculcate in school science students. Whereas a more playfully experimental approach would help a lot. At school you can do 'experiments' but they are so highly regulated and scripted that you're not actually *experimenting*. You're just imitating a procedure, and the most radical thing that can happen is that you follow the procedure 'incorrectly' and the teacher treats you like a fool.

The research on play suggests it's a great way of learning, and encourages creative thought generally. A minority of teachers and experts in learning are recognising this today, but still on the whole 'play' is seen as a childish thing, lacking discipline and lacking an appropriate adult attitude.

PH: Well, I think we've covered some issues about this approach and the thinking behind it; what you can do with visual material; the hand–mind connection; your Lego work; some models of identity; and the connection of this approach with learning. We're both interested in hearing about other work that connects with this – it's not always easy to know the whole range of connected projects that are happening in the world.

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