2. ‘A PICTURE TELLS MORE THAN A THOUSAND WORDS’

Drawings Used as Research Method

INTRODUCTION

‘A picture tells more than a thousand words’, is a common saying. Given that a picture tells more than a thousand words – how can we understand and use this expression? How can a picture, or an image, be analysed and used as part of educational research? In this chapter the use of images, and more specifically drawings, will be explored. First, I will elaborate on pictures as expression and as a form of language. Next, the collection of data in form of drawings will be illuminated and discussed. Furthermore, I will explore one way to analyse drawings, and finally, challenges and possibilities of the use of drawings will be discussed in relation to research. When exploring the use of drawings, previous studies will serve as examples (Alerby, 2008; Westman, Alerby & Brown, 2013). However, focus is mainly on how the drawings have been, and can be, collected and analysed, and not on the results per se of the respective studies.

IMAGES AS EXPRESSION

Human experience, knowledge, visions, attitudes, views et cetera can be expressed and communicated in many different ways. In other words, as humans we have the ability to use many forms of ‘language’, including different forms of symbolic and visual systems, or so called ‘non-verbal’ language (Alerby, 2012). However, the most common way for human beings to express one’s self and communicate with others is to use spoken words. Another common language is written words. By making a brief history of our Western culture, the most valued genres of written texts, such as literary novels, academic texts, official documents or various types of reports, have almost exclusively been produced without images or illustrations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). For quite a long time, monomodality, namely the use of one type of character in communication, has been clearly and explicitly advocated. Views of human language have though, over the last few decades, changed in society as well as in schools (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Multimodality is now part of everyday educational practice (Hurtig, 2007). This view has broadened perspectives on language, and includes assumptions that spoken or written language may not be...
enough to fully represent humans’ experience, knowledge, visions, attitudes, views et cetera. This broadened perspective of language has in turn affected research, increasing the use of multimodal methods, when the purpose is to grasp, for example, humans’ experience of different phenomena in the world.

Beyond our ordinary spoken or written words, there is, according to Polanyi (1969), a rich domain of that which cannot be spoken that constantly beckons us. Given this, spoken or written words alone may not be enough to represent human knowledge – there are also silent dimensions, which he calls ‘tacit knowledge’, beyond what is explicitly expressed. Merleau-Ponty (1995) also stresses that not everything can be communicated verbally – there is something that exists beyond what is said, something that cannot be communicated verbally, which he calls a silent and implicit language. However, this silent and implicit language can appear through visual presentations, such as different kinds of art forms. One way to evoke some of what lies hidden in the tacit domain of our knowledge is therefore to use different forms of visual expression (Alerby & Brown, 2008).

Alerby and Bergmark (2012) explore the use of different visual art forms in research – photographs, lino-prints and drawings – from a life-world perspective, and emphasise the similarities of the process of collecting the data, as well as the process of analysis. It is not the art form per se that is of significance: it is the process of analysing and interpreting the meaning of the image. There are, however, differences to be observant of, for example a photograph can only depict what is in the nearby area of the one taking the photo. This circumstance can be compared with a drawing, in which the person making the drawing can depict imaginary phenomenon or objects, and the same is true for a lino-print. In this chapter the focus is, however, on drawings as a way to express experiences.

A drawing can be used to both express experiences and stimulate reflections, and Alerby and Elídóttir (2003) argue that different ‘non-verbal languages’, in the form of images, evoke reflections, which in turn are connected to lived experience. Because an image, such as a drawing, can be regarded as a form of language, it can be interpreted. Expressed in other words – an object of art can be seen as a text (van Manen, 1990). Even though this kind of text does not consist of a verbal language, it is a language with its own structure and meaning. Given this, a drawing can express something in the same way that spoken or written words can express something. Therefore, language has to be regarded as much more than oral and written speech, and as Dewey (1991) suggests “anything consciously employed as a sign is, logically, language” (p. 170). Following Dewey’s view, paintings, illustrations and other visuals, can be one way to communicate and express, for example, experiences, and therefore also can be used as a method when conducting research. The use of drawings as empirical data on different topics has been embraced by myself and several other researchers (see, for example, Alerby, 1998, 2000, 2003; Alerby & Bergmark, 2012; Alerby & Brown, 2008; Alerby & Istenic Starcic, 2008; Aronsson & Andersson, 1996; Herting & Alerby, 2009; Jonsson, Sarri, & Alerby, 2012; Luttrell, 2010; Sewell, 2011; Yates, 2010).