Drawing Information in the Classroom

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Information lies at the center of information studies, the information professions, and information education. Yet there are few agreed upon pedagogical strategies for engaging students in our central concept. In many educational programs the nature of information is assumed to be obvious and therefore left uninterrogated. Alternatively, students may be asked to read articles, such as "Information as Thing" (Buckland, 1991), in conjunction with a lecture, class discussion, or writing assignment. To expand the available options, this brief communication offers educators in information studies a new, arts-based, participatory approach for teaching about information itself.

At the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, I ask my students to draw a conception of information on a 4″ by 4″ piece of paper, coined an "iSquare." This activity serves as a genial entrée to an abstruse topic, accommodates a wide-variety of learning styles and intelligences, complements the scholarly literature about information, leads to lively class discussions, and generates a bespoke collection of images that can be tapped throughout the semester.

Conceptions of information traditionally appear as definitions made of words, but there are compelling reasons to invite students into the conversation via images. Drawing activities have been used successfully in other fields to engage learners in the topics of celebrity (Gauntlett, 2005), teaching (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), and economics, (Budd, 2004), among many other matters. Visual theorist and educator Sandra Weber (2008) asserts that images are more accessible than academic discourse, capture things that are hard to put into words, communicate more holistically, evoke stories or questions, and help us pay attention in new ways.

The classroom procedure is easy to execute and utilizes readily available, inexpensive materials. In advance, heavy white drawing paper should be cut into 4″ by 4″ squares. Good quality paper encourages students to take the activity seriously; the modest size keeps the images from sprawling and is more felicitous to display and manipulate afterwards. One side will be used for the drawing surface and the other to capture a profile of the participant. For greater consistency, black pens can be provided to all students, which limit the expression of information to a simple monochrome figure. To begin, instructions should be presented as follows:

> On one side of the paper respond to the question "What is information?" in the form of a drawing. On the other side of the paper write your name, age, gender, and area of study. You will have 10 minutes. Please use the paper and pens provided.

Each student will produce one unique drawing and altogether the class generates a diverse collection of iSquares, for a learning experience on both personal and social levels. My previous research has found (Hartel, in press) that the pictures capture the major themes surrounding information today. For instance, some drawings will locate information in the mind, in renderings of the brain or head animated with a thought bubble [Figure 1(a)]. Other expressions will reflect the communicatory and social aspect of information, entailing figures talking in twosomes or groups [Figure 1(b)]. Many pictures will likely capture "information as thing" (Buckland,

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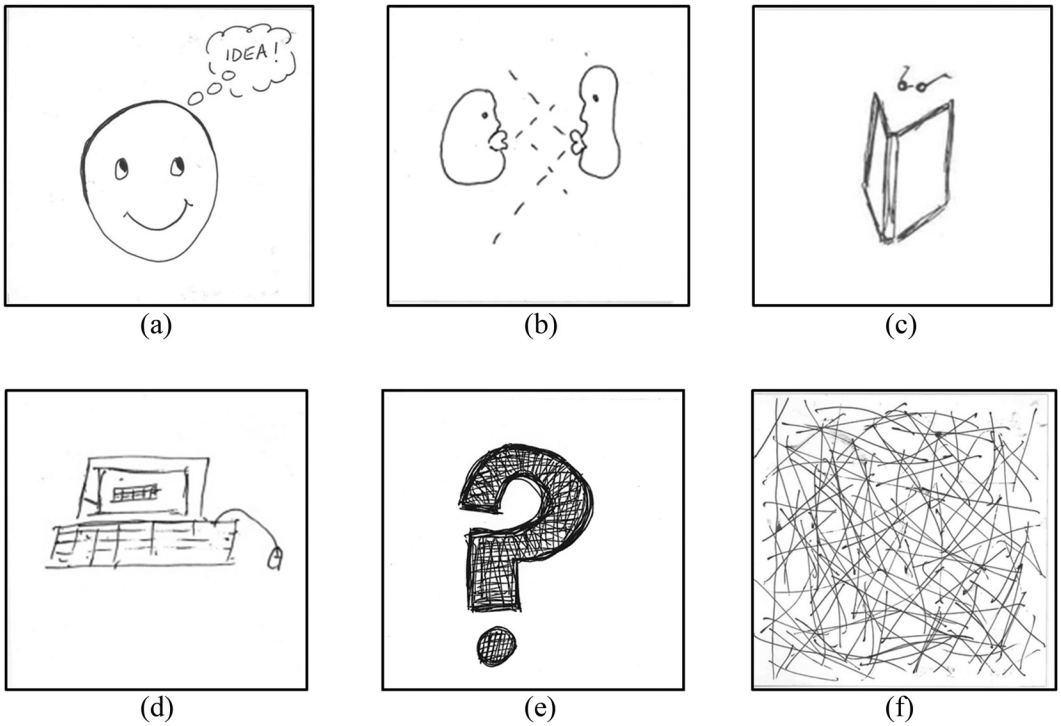

Figure 1. Sample iSquares, showing common renderings of information.

1991) with displays of books, documents, or technologies [Figure 1(c) and 1(d)]. Often students will envision information in symbols, whether periods, dollar signs, or question marks [Figure 1(e)]. The dynamic, abstract, and somewhat mysterious nature of information may appear in striking patterns made of circles, dots, or dashes [Figure 1(f)].

When the drawing activity is completed students are usually alert and curious; then an instructor can deepen the learning experience in a variety of ways. To focus on the personal understanding of information, participants may be asked to elaborate their iSquare using words, in the form of a presentation or paper. To emphasize the diversity of conceptions across the class, small groups can be formed in which people share and discuss their visualizations with each other. To turn attention to the excellent literature about information in our field, students might be asked to locate an article that best characterizes their drawing; Bates' (2010) survey of information in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* is one place to start. Another approach is for the instructor to collect the iSquares and perform visual analysis (Rose, 2007; Hartel, in press), later reporting the discoveries back to the class. The images can be retained throughout the semester and used in lectures and discussions to illustrate major concepts or themes of information studies, giving the curriculum a personal dimension. The profile data on the back side (name, age, gender, area of study) helps to organize the iSquares and can be used in any of the activities above to consider variables that may impact students' conceptions of information.

The arts-based pedagogical strategy described here can be adapted to different circumstances or objectives. Students can be invited to draw other central concepts of information studies, such as "data" or "knowledge," leading to comparative reflections. The activity can be performed at the beginning and end of the semester to determine if understandings change

over time. Learners can be allowed greater range with the materials, and render information in paint, collage, or digital formats.

The information environment today is often entertaining and highly visual, suggesting that students and educators alike would benefit from a multimedia, playful, expansive approach to the concept of information in the classroom.

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