

The art of audiencing: Visual journaling as a media education practice

Theresa Redmond

Appalachian State University, USA



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Corresponding Author:
Theresa Redmond
redmondta@appstate.edu

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative methods with an action research design, the author investigates uses of visual journaling as a media production opportunity in an undergraduate media literacy class. Through visual journaling as an arts-based inquiry process, students engaged in production, creating and sharing graphical representations of their emerging media literacy knowledge and perspectives. Findings illuminate visual journaling as a way of *audiencing* that cultivates agentive knowledge building, active negotiation of learning, and student-centered expression in the context of media literacy education. Visual journaling as a method of production results in a manageable and creative maker experience that augments learning, inviting students to synthesize physical materials and nonlinear digital content as a contemporary literacy act. Visual journaling has implications not only as a literacy exercise, but also as an anti-oppressive and democratic teaching and learning practice.

Keywords: *media literacy, media production, arts-based inquiry, visual journaling, action research, remix.*

INTRODUCTION

Just as students analyze and evaluate existing media messages in the context of a media literacy course or program, creating their own media content is a valuable dimension of media literacy education. Creating and producing media can be motivating, engaging, and empowering for students of all ages, as well as prepare students to more actively interpret media messages once outside of the classroom. Making media can reveal the hidden production techniques and strategies of media content (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbs, 2019) contributing to important habits of mind for decoding media. Yet, it is generally unclear how media production is included in media literacy courses and programs. When incorporated in the general classroom, it is typically regarded as using audio-visual media – like cameras, mics, video-editing software, or web-based creation tools. However, this device-centered approach may entail complex pre-requisites including: advanced teacher training, intentional curricular coordination with content area objectives, extensive class time, and specialized equipment and space to guide students from concept to post-production. Consequently, not all media literacy courses or programs include media production in active balance with the skills of media interpretation. Regardless, the value of media production has been affirmed as a pathway for emboldening youth literacy in the field of media education as well as encouraged in the field of literacies studies at large. The purpose of this article is to share my experiences as a teacher and action researcher incorporating media production into my undergraduate *Media Literacy* class using the arts-based inquiry process of visual journaling. This article has implications for teachers, librarians, and higher education faculty seeking to incorporate digital and media literacy in order to facilitate creative expression and critical hands-on learning, as well as youth educators working in non-traditional learning contexts.

BACKGROUND

Media production in media literacy

Defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (NAMLE, Media literacy defined, n.d.), media literacy necessarily incorporates production. However, to seamlessly integrate media analysis and production

within a single curriculum can be a cumbersome challenge for media literacy educators throughout K-12 and in higher education contexts. To begin, teacher preparation and training for media production is inconsistent (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Kumar & Vigil, 2011; Lei, 2009). Even with training, incorporating media production into learning requires blocks of curricular time in order to fully address the narrative, aesthetic, and technical aspects of media making, in addition to substantial intervals to engage in the production phases (Buckingham, 2003; Burn & Durran, 2007; Peppler & Kafai, 2007). A significant investment in physical equipment (e.g., cameras, mics, lighting, computers) and software may be required, in addition to the physical space to store equipment, house computers, and staff positions to manage it. Added to this is the likelihood that students will arrive at the production experience with varying prior knowledge and skills which can complicate group work dynamics (Buckingham, 2007). Finally, deconstructing the vast range of media topics relevant to a twenty-first century media literacy curriculum effectively is a hefty task itself, suggesting many media literacy teachers may neglect production in favor of analysis or interpretation as a primary vehicle for learning (Blum-Ross, 2015; Leach, 2017; Potter, 2012; Redmond, 2019). While there are some case studies of media literacy classes or programs that comprise both analysis and production (Burn & Durran, 2007; Redmond, 2013; Share, 2009), the analytical and evaluative aspects typically end up separate from creative production – students *either* take a theoretical class focused on deconstructing media *or* they take a production class focused on making media that lacks engagement with the critical dimensions of media literacy (Hobbs, 1998; Hobbs, 2004; Redmond, 2013), thereby diminishing critical perspectives in digital storytelling practices.

As to if or how production is actually included in media literacy courses and programs, we have little concrete insight into tangible classroom practice. Culver and Redmond (2019) collaborated with the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) to coordinate the first report on the state of media literacy education in the United States, including an assessment of topics addressed in media literacy courses and programs. Survey results revealed that most teachers were focused on information literacy (68.75%), agenda and bias (67.01%), and news literacy (67.01%). Only 31.60% of respondents indicated media production in

their selection (2019, p. 6). A dominant focus on information gathering, detecting bias, and news literacy with sparse inclusion of media production suggests that most media literacy courses and programs situate learners as media consumers, *not* creators or makers. In a more recent study of media making, Dezuanni (2015) adds that there is a need for research that elucidates the *material practices* and *conceptual understandings* of media production and, to this end, examines the *building blocks* embedded in media making. Despite the myriad challenges of incorporating media production in media literacy learning, the arts hold important potential for how production and media making may be reimaged and integrated within a unified media literacy curriculum, particularly in the context of higher education where there are few existing studies.

Arts-based inquiry

Arts-based inquiry or artistic inquiry may be understood as ways of knowing that directly involve the student, researcher, group, or person in “some form of direct artmaking as a primary mode of systematic inquiry” (McNiff, 2011, p. 385). Employed widely in the fields of visual arts, art therapy, and expressive arts, arts-based inquiry is gaining momentum in a number of other established fields including English, rhetoric and composition, literacy studies, curriculum studies, and science.

The component, *art*, generously refers to a wide range of forms, such as “creative writing, dance, drama, music and the visual arts” (McNiff, 2011, p. 386) in addition to emerging modalities including video, audio, and web-based forms. Arts-based inquiry is premised on the idea that “art-making [is] central to human experience [and] not restricted to those possessing genius or to professional artists” (Levine & Levine, 2017, p. 179). Barone and Eisner (2012) established “the arts themselves are not limited to the so-called fine arts but lead their lives among all that we do to make things aesthetic” (p. 46). Using arts-based inquiry as a creative pedagogy in learning, teachers of all disciplines – and working with multiple ages or grades – may enhance learning, including students’ cognitive and affective investments in curriculum (Tyler & Likova, 2012, p. 1). In other words, “the creative arts do not discriminate – learning is available to everyone when an appropriate route is provided – and assessment of achievement does not rely on written and verbal outcomes alone” (Simons & Hicks, 2006, p. 87).

Indeed, beyond the arts, visual literacy scholars Kedra and Zakeviciute (2019) argue the visual may be “considered as the basic knowledge and competency that should be further developed in all disciplines” (p. 1). Finally, like media, the arts are cultural forms and their expressive use invites active negotiation and reflection when incorporated into creative expression that includes explanatory stages (Buckingham, 2007; Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010).

Visual journaling

Visual Journaling is a reflective arts-based inquiry technique anchored in multiple fields, including the visual arts, art therapy, and expressive arts. A visual journal is similar to a sketchbook, art journal, diary, or other physical notebook where authors may freely record any matter of ideas on blank pages. Visual journaling uses a combination of images and words from a variety of media and materials, including paintings, drawings, doodles, magazine elements, newspaper clippings, found materials, and more. “Essentially, visual journals are multimodal artefacts which combine written, visual, aural, musical, tactile, and special modes through various media” (Belcher & Loerts, 2019, p. 1). The focus of visual journaling is not to create art or even an artful page. Rather, the visual journal is a reflective space that authors may use to engage in active meaning-making. While visual journaling is widely used as a personal document, it may also be used in teaching and learning practices. In the context of education, visual journaling may be open-ended or be encouraged via structured prompts, such as inquiry questions, scenarios, quotes, or other guiding invitations. Teachers may include visual journaling as an ongoing assignment that is not turned in, an assignment that is grounded in periodic assessments, or as a classroom practice for inquiry. Scholars have documented the contributions of visual journaling in various professional learning contexts, including counseling, teacher education (Belcher & Loerts, 2019; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008), early childhood literacy (Krause, 2015), environmental education (Song, 2012), and in higher education teaching and research (Redmond, et al., 2021; Hash, et al., 2021).

METHODS

This section details my investigation into visual journaling as a form of media production in an undergraduate media literacy course using qualitative

methods with an action research (AR) design. I begin by reframing the problem in terms that are specific to my classroom context before explaining the specific research inquiry, data points, and analysis.

Problem

Since 2014, I have been teaching an undergraduate course in media literacy. *Media Literacy* is a core course in a campus-wide *Media Studies* minor that is taken by students at many levels – first-year through senior year – and from a number of different majors (e.g., Electronic Media and Broadcasting, Advertising, Public Relations, Journalism, Film Studies, English, Political Science, Creative Writing, Education, and more). As the minor comprises mostly courses in production – such as *Video Production and Story*, *Audio Documentary Production*, and *Photography and Digital Imaging – Media Literacy* stands out with its focus on the theoretical aspects of media messages, language, representations, industries, audiences, and effects (Martens, 2010; Buckingham, 2020) and its pedagogy of analysis and evaluation. While students build skills in producing media across their elective courses in the minor, their media production work rarely incorporates the critical dimensions of media literacy as a subject of study. Yet, when integrated in tandem within a unified media literacy curriculum or course, media production has the potential to strengthen students’ analytical insights. As such, I have attempted to incorporate media making into my *Media Literacy* course in meaningful ways that support the boarder goals of media literacy and empower students as reflective media makers.

For example, in a unit examining representations in commercials, I introduced students to *ad-busting* and invited them to create “unbranded ads” in the spirit of conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas, and his series *Unbranded*. As described in Redmond (2019), this assignment required students to engage in counter narrative production using Adobe Photoshop. Similarly, in an ecomedia literacy unit, I structured a media production activity where students remixed short advertisements that prominently featured nature, planet Earth, or the environment in order to draw out an environmentally-conscious counter narrative that was omitted from the original ad. For this assignment, students worked in Adobe Premiere and iMovie. While both of these production assignments were successful in combining the interpretive decoding work of analysis and evaluation with the creative, encoding of media making, they were ambitious for inclusion in a semester-

long course. Some students were hindered by the technical aspects of production, while others completed their projects quickly. Ultimately, the production work felt disjointed, cumbersome, and took up too much class time. Upon reflection, I began to feel that it may also have been somewhat misaligned with my pedagogical goals.

After a few semesters working to incorporate media production in my already over-crowded media literacy curriculum, I concluded that my approach was flawed. I was defining production strictly in terms of digital audio-visual technology where students worked with tools and software to create products. However, my goals for production were principally theoretical and only tangentially technical. I sought to include production as an avenue for student reflection on their emerging perspectives related to course content and topics. Though reflection was paramount, this goal became ensconced by the mechanical requirements of production. Class became about the “how to” with students distracted by adding sound effects or titles, rather than focused on critical inquiry. While learning the technical steps in production is important, the objectives of my course centered in critical making. It is from this context that I began using visual journaling as creative pedagogy.

Inquiry

This action research emerged from a larger, ongoing self-study called “Navigating the Nonlinear” where I have been investigating my practices in media literacy education in terms of curriculum, pedagogies, and student perspectives. Feldman et al. (2004) explain self-study “makes the experience of the teacher educators a resource for research” and that it is closely aligned with action research (p. 959). The primary purpose of action research is “to modify or transform one’s practice or situation” (Feldman, et al., 2004, p. 953). Both self-study and action research methodologies are extensions of qualitative methods where study of one’s own teaching with student participants is prioritized, accepted, and celebrated. Working with one’s own curriculum and students is justified through this methodological approach. In this spirit, a thread of my large self-study has been active examination of my curriculum modifications related to student expression and media making (Redmond, 2019). In addressing this strand of the parent study, I carefully re-framed my inquiry through reflection on my teacher identity, passions, and students’ needs in rapidly changing media

ecosystems and economies. Meaningful questions in action research studies frequently intersect with teacher identity and passions.

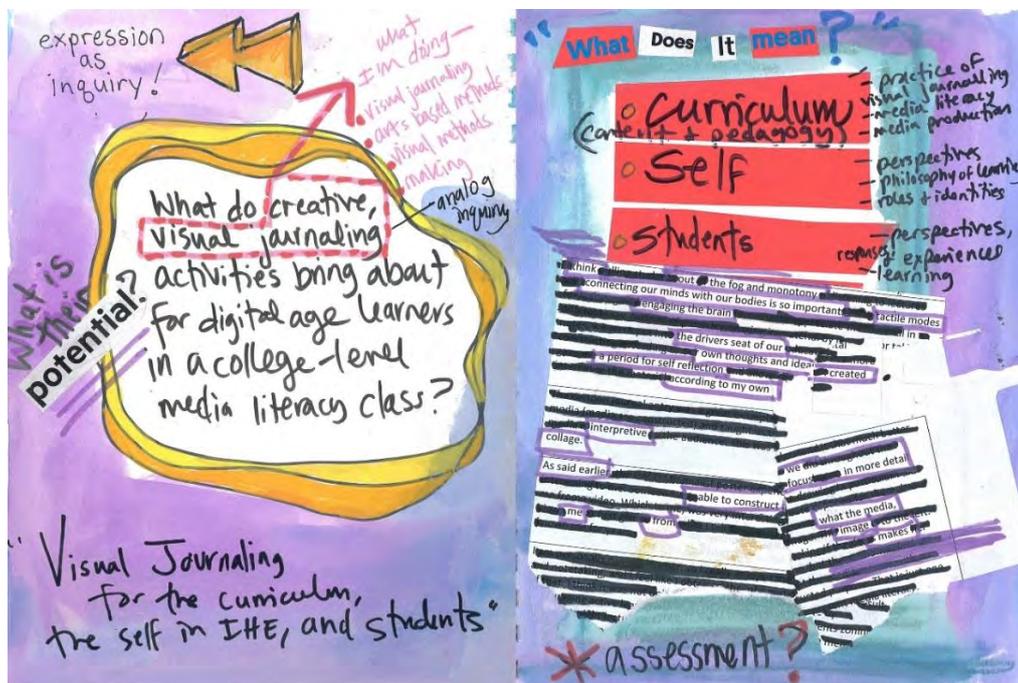


Figure 2. Arriving at the inquiry. Visual journaling may be used to facilitate the scholarly research process for teachers engaged in action research.

As a former visual arts teacher, my interest in visual journaling as a production opportunity reflects my history with making as a creative inquiry process. I have many journal pages dedicated to the development of this particular research trajectory (see Figure 2) and, as described in the data collection section, these pages may be used recursively as arts-based data.

Barone and Eisner (2012) explain that the arts, like the sciences, are “highly focused on dimensions of human experience” and intentional observation and reflection over time creates coherence in the patterns of that human experience (p. 46). In observing the patterns emergent in my journals, I have identified two questions focused on visual journaling in media literacy:

1. How might visual journaling serve as a creative production opportunity for students in a media literacy course?
2. What contributions might visual journaling make to students’ experiences and perspectives in media literacy?

Together, these questions inquire into improving, enriching, and experimenting with curriculum and teaching strategies (Pine, 2009) and, as is the nature of action research, these questions may change or be

revised throughout the phases of the action research spiral.

Participants

The participants of this study were the students who took *Media Literacy* during fall 2018 and spring 2019 semesters. The study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), and students were invited to participate via an informed consent process in accordance with ethical research procedures. I did not collect demographic information beyond that which is available via the university’s course enrollment system, namely, class year and major. I used this information as evidence that the course comprises wide variation in terms of students’ college year and major. For the semesters of this study, students spanned those in their first-year, sophomore year, junior year, and senior year. Similarly, the majors of students in a given class included: Commercial Photography, Electronic Media and Broadcasting, Journalism, Advertising, Creative Writing, Public Relations, Film Studies, Education, Recreation Management, Music Education, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, among others.

Generally, the students across both semesters reflected the demographics of the larger university population, which is predominately white and composed of mostly in-state students – only 7.6% are from out-of-state¹. Of the university’s approximately 18,000 main campus undergraduates, only 18% identify as racially and ethnically underrepresented. For the purpose of this study, the most pertinent information is that students’ class year and majors were considerably varied, in turn suggesting that students arrived in my class with wide-ranging prior knowledge, skills, and expertise.

Data collection

As with other qualitative methodologies, action research methods include identifying data collection points that bear on the inquiry. Specifically, I identified the following four data points:

1. Planning and processing documents;
2. Formal documentation of journaling activities;
3. End-of-semester student interviews; and
4. Engagement in a critical friends group.

The first data point comprises my planning and processing documents. These include related funding proposals, lesson plans, brief observational notes, and reflective visual journaling pages that I created.

The second data point is formal documentation of all journaling activities across both semesters that I used to track my curriculum modifications. My documentation of journaling activities comprised: the activity date, the activity name, a description, and a folder of student work.

The third data point is the perspectives of the students themselves gathered via student interviews. As a part of the larger study mentioned previously, students complete end-of-semester interviews to share their emerging perspectives. In terms of this specific action research project, I decided not to modify the interview protocol by adding questions in fall 2018 so as to allow students’ experiences to surface naturally. While I did not alter my interview initially, some students opted to discuss visual journaling nonetheless. Thus, following my students’ lead, I added one question about visual journaling to the spring 2019 interview. In this second semester of action, I included the question: “Comment on our uses of visual journaling in the context of media literacy. What, if any, were the effects of visual activities

on your learning experience? Be specific.” I will discuss student responses from both fall 2018 and spring 2019 in the data analysis section; all names will be pseudonyms.

Lastly, a key component of action research methodology is engagement with a critical friends group, and this group comprises my final data point. “Critical friends share a commitment to inquiry, offer continuing support throughout the research process, and nurture a community of intellectual and emotional caring” (Pine, 2009, p. 236). In conjunction with beginning this action research, I initiated an interdisciplinary scholarly reading group with modest funding from our university’s Humanities Council. The funds were awarded in October 2018 and supported the acquisition of two texts for six members; (1) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* by Gillian Rose (2016) and (2) *Visual Journaling: Going Deeper than Words* by Barbara Ganim and Susan Fox (1999). In November 2018, our group began meeting twice per month to study, discuss, and engage in visual journaling related to the complex intersections between media literacy, visual methods, and arts-based inquiry.

The collaborative inquiry process of this critical friends group serves to advance and validate the research inquiry in action research and self-study methodologies (Pine, 2009). Specifically, critical friends serve to “reduce bias and secure validity” of the research endeavor by creating necessary “distance between researcher and researched” (Feldman, 2009, p. 45). We continue to meet even as this is written and have established ourselves as the Creativity Collaborative (Redmond, et al., 2021), presenting at regional and national scholarly conferences and engaging actively in publishing related to our individual and collective work with arts-based inquiry.

Data analysis

In this section, I use the four phases of action research design – *planning, acting, observing, and reflecting* – to explicate the process of the study, as well as examine the data. Ultimately, I investigate one cycle of the action research spiral across two semesters – fall 2018 and spring 2019 – ending with the reflecting phase to illuminate my findings (Altrichter, et al., 2002). Because action research is recursive, the data points may be discussed across the four phases.

¹ Information comes from the University’s facts page at <https://www.appstate.edu/about/facts/>

Planning. To incorporate visual journaling into my class, I first needed supplies. In May 2018, I initiated an internal proposal with our university’s teaching center “The Center for Academic Excellence” to secure funds for materials. With the modest award, I purchased journals, watercolor pencils, and glue sticks to serve approximately twenty students. I supplemented these supplies with materials that I bought, such as scissors and washi tape, as well as supplies collected from yard sales and thrift stores, including magazines, old books, and other fodder. The journals and supplies would be housed in my university office and hauled to-and-from classes, as multiple course sections would share a common journal in order to extend the limited resources. The proposal serves as an artifact for the present study, revealing important details about the initial purposes of my action and my initial assumptions related to visual journaling. For instances, the following excerpt from my proposal shows that I sought to deemphasize digital tools by incorporating visual journaling, while maintaining, and even augmenting, opportunities for production related to media literacy topics:

Media production using digital tools shapes the reciprocal of complete digital media literacy... While I use many digital tools, such as photography and video production, and many Adobe services, including Photoshop, Muse, Spark, and Premiere for student production, I have not yet employed physical tools in my teaching. By incorporating visual journaling using physical materials in my class, I hope to create opportunities for students

to engage in storytelling, particularly as it relates to the narrative of their digital media experience. (Excerpt from my grant proposal, May 2018)

With the supplies in hand, I began to redesign my curriculum to include visual journaling components in alignment with media literacy course objectives. I began with attention to accessible journaling prompts and strategies, such as found poetry and collage, in order to support students’ comfort-level. Although visual journaling is not focused on art expertise or skill, many students carry “art wounds” that may inhibit engagement. As I planned, I realized that the pedagogical practices I typically employed in teaching, including gallery walks, Socratic seminar, peer interviews, and small group discussions, could be aligned with visual journaling. With this awareness, my curriculum redesign expanded to not only include visual journaling in the physical journals, but also reflective digital activities, such as collecting audio via interviews and working with existing source texts, like icons from *The Noun Project* or images from *Unsplash*. My digital journaling activities, such as emoji haiku, were largely inspired by Burvall and Ryder’s (2017) book *Intention: Critical Creativity in the Classroom*. Figure 2 shows two student examples; the image on the left features a found poem from a physical journal and the image on the right shows an emoji haiku that was created digitally.



Figure 2. Student examples of Visual Journaling. In my media literacy class, visual journaling encompasses using both physical materials and processes, such as creating a found poem on the left, as well as using digital source texts, such as emoji haiku on the right

Acting. In fall 2018, I incorporated visual journaling into my media literacy class through short, focused prompts. Generally, journaling comprised about fifteen or twenty minutes of a seventy-five minute class session. This will prove an important variable in the *reflecting*

phase. Students engaged in fourteen visual journaling activities over the fifteen-week semester that traversed multiple modalities including making original images using drawing, collage, writing, and collecting audio via interviews, along with journaling using existing source

texts such as emojis, cartoons, and icons. Journaling included independent student works as well as pieces that were created collaboratively.

For example, in a collaborative activity I called “Mapping Credibility,” students worked together in groups of four to deconstruct printed copies of credibility charts and strategies such as “How to Spot Fake News” created by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and The CRAAP Test from Sarah Blakeslee (2004) and California State University to design revised roadmaps to credibility. To set the stage, I invited students to dismantle a world atlas that I purchased at a thrift shop. Students considered the limitations of credibility charts and methods, re-constructing them into personalized maps that reflected their own experiences with information gathering. As a creative constraint, I asked that students use all four journals in the final production. Figure 3 shows how one group choose to create one image structured across their journals so that, when pieced together, the four journals contributed to a unified map. Because I did not require written explanations of students’ journaling, I cannot identify students’ creative intentions or accurately gauge the symbolism of the journals. This will be an important aspect of the *reflecting* phase.



Figure 3. *Mapping Credibility*. Students collaborated in reconstructing credibility charts and strategies with atlas pages to represent their personalized experiences with information gathering and fact-checking.

My integration of journaling in spring 2019 used a similar approach, including solo and collaborative activities across a range of modalities. I continued to provide prompts and contain journaling to short segments of class time in alignment with other pedagogical strategies, such as discussion, media viewing, and group work. In spring 2019, students engaged in ten visual journaling activities that traversed multiple modalities.

Observing. My observation of journaling activities encompassed related planning documents and brief notes, I made after classes. The most interesting of these were rough notes that I scrawled on an early lesson plan document that referenced the nature of visual journaling as an embodied, physical process, as explained the next paragraph.

The first class session of fall 2018 that included visual journaling was for “Concept Collages.” In this activity, students repurposed images and words from magazines to represent a key concept of media literacy. After introducing the fifteen-minute task, the entire mood of the class shifted from the dullish tenor of small group conversations to a captivating buzz of focused and purposeful movement. As student flipped through magazines, cut out words and images, and began pasting to the page, I had the surreal feeling that they were starved for engagement in creative, physical making. There was a figurative hunger and striking urgency in the manner in which they worked (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Engagement in Visual Journaling*. Engaged in active making, students synthesize conceptions of key concepts in media literacy using collage materials

The pedagogy of making seemed to provide a necessary healing that had been missing from their educational experience for a long time.

As mentioned previously, in fall 2018, I did not alter my end-of-semester interview questions in conjunction with this action research. Nevertheless, in their

interviews, some students chose to discuss visual journaling. For instance, Mateo said, “I wasn’t honestly one for journaling before this class, but I really did enjoy that aspect of the class and felt like it helped me get my thoughts on paper better” (Interview, Fall 2018). Beth also discussed how journaling impacted her thinking, explaining:

I enjoyed the journaling assignments, specifically the ones in the beginning of the semester which involved cutting out magazines and finding symbols to represent our thoughts on the first unit about fake news. I found it to be challenging to take something as concrete as my feelings about the issue and express those feelings in a more abstract way. (Interview, Fall 2018)

Finally, Hillary was surprised to make media without digital technology, sharing:

Working in the journals was something that I did not expect. Coming into the class having worked in other classes in the Media Studies minor, I have never really worked in a way that was not technology based. It was a welcome and new way to still create and consider media without screens having to be involved. (Interview, Fall 2018)

Because students elected to talk about journaling, I added one question to my spring 2019 interviews. I asked, “Comment on our uses of visual journaling in the context of media literacy. What, if any, were the effects of visual activities on your learning experience? Be specific.”

With regards to this question, students from the spring 2019 semester shared similar comments, expressing pleasant surprise to encounter visual journaling in a college-level course and discussed the challenges and rewards of engaging in learning and expressing their ideas across modalities. For example, Julian said, “For me, visual journaling was just a really good way to step back from the digital realm and focus on creating something that involved my hands” (Interview, Spring 2019). Similarly, Briana described the impacts of journaling on her learning:

When we did the visual journaling, it really enforced what we were learning about at that time. For example, one of the first visual journaling exercises we did was the found ideas we used with one of the readings from Potter. This not only enforced the ideas we learned about in the reading, but also made us put into context what we read and interpret it into our own thoughts. A lot of the times, we just talk about what the reading said and not what we got out of it or how we interpret it. (Interview, Spring 2019)

Along with benefits for learning, students described feeling connected and empowered, such as Cate, who shared:

I think pulling students out of the fog and monotony of listening to lectures and connecting our minds with our bodies is so important. Using tactile modes for learning and engaging the brain forces us to appreciate the material in a different way. Instead of passively engaging in material by listening or taking notes, we were put into the driver’s seat of our education by creating and constructing according to our own thoughts and ideas. The visual activities gave me a period for self-reflection and allowed me to interpret and internalize the material according to my own feelings and experiences. (Interview, Spring 2019)

Other students shared their initial skepticism, like Callie who explained:

I honestly did not think that the visual journaling was going to be as effective as it was just because I’m, personally, not a visual arts person. There was something about cutting up magazines and using media to interpret media that had made a connection. It made me realize that sometimes you need to create media to understand it. (Interview, Spring 2019)

Some students critiqued how I incorporated journaling, suggesting limitations for me to consider, such as Eloise who shared:

As a visual learner, I excel in situations where I get to express what I am thinking in a form other than words. At times, I felt as if the topics and prompts were too limiting, I found myself driving away from the original topic and doing things a little differently than the given example. Part of that may be due to my contradictory and outside of the box nature, but I do feel as if my other classmates stopped at the example and didn’t think to go any further. (Interview, Spring 2019)

Adding one interview question about journaling became an important dimension of my observation process, inviting students to participate in the action and have a role in the reflection and revision phases. I will examine their remarks in the discussion section.

Reflecting. In analyzing the first three phases of research action, I summarize and reflect on my observations of students’ remarks, as well as observations of my lesson plans, activity documents, and engagement in the critical friends group. Of the 20 students who took media literacy in fall 2018, seven made unsolicited remarks about visual journaling in their interviews; four mentioned visual journaling broadly, while three described specific prompts. In spring 2019, I invited student remarks about visual journaling in the interview. For these, I used thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterned responses in student comments as a data set (p. 10). My initial coding in June 2019 led to ten themes that I refined to six themes by October 2020. The refined themes are described in Table 1.

Table 1. *Themes on visual journaling from spring 2019 end-of-semester student interviews*

| Theme | Description | Sample student remarks |
|---|--|---|
| Cultivated visual and hands-on learning | These remarks suggest visual journaling as a successful strategy for visual learners and hands-on learners. | <p>“Visual journaling was just a really good way to step back from the digital realm and focus and creating something that involved my hands. [It] helped me involve myself in the construction of media a lot more” (Bri, Spring 2019).</p> <p>“As a visual learner I excel in situations where I get to express what I am thinking in a form other than words” (Emmie, Spring 2019).</p> |
| Enhanced engagement and effort | These comments suggest visual journaling led to enhanced engagement and effort during class and learning activities. Student comments suggest that creative activities hold appeal and that visual journaling was an outlier in their general undergraduate course experience. | <p>“I really liked my composition and I remember distinctly being a lot more drawn to giving effort within the assignment due to the personal creative effort I was allowed to input” (Marc, Spring 2019).</p> <p>“The visual journaling exercises were some of the most engaging parts of class and allowed us to take a step away from some of the formalities of learning about media literacy and interpret what we had learned in our own words and light” (Marc, Spring 2019).</p> |
| Required thinking deeply | These remarks focused on thinking, including increased memory, recall, and retention of course ideas, in addition to the complexity of having to put ideas into a visual form. | <p>“I think visualizing a concept always helps me understand it that much better. By participating in the visual journaling activities we did throughout the semester, I was able to grasp the ideas we were focusing on in more detail and with a deeper understanding” (Jane, Spring 2019).</p> <p>“Visual journaling it really enforced what we were learning about at that time. For example, one of the first visual journaling exercises we did was the found ideas we used with one of the readings from Potter. This not only enforced the ideas we learned about in the reading, but also made us put into context what we read and interpret it into our own thoughts. A lot of the times we just talk about what the reading said and not what we got out of it or how we interpret it” (Rhonda, Spring 2019).</p> |
| Invited peer perspectives | These comments referred to students experiences accessing the perspectives of their peers via sharing in visual journaling. | <p>“Hearing what other people came up with allowed me to hear about controversial media constructs that I potentially wouldn’t have before” (Wendy, Spring 2019).</p> <p>“We got to see everyone’s different perspectives on all the topics we talked about...You got to see everyone’s opinions... In the end, it helped show people’s creative sides as well as what their true opinions might be because they might not have wanted to share in front of the entire class” (Troy, Spring 2019).</p> |
| Skeptics | These comments illuminate students’ skepticism of visual journaling as a learning tool. | <p>“I honestly did not think that the visual journaling was going to as effective as it was just because I’m personally not a visual arts person. There was something about cutting up magazines and using media to interpret media that made a connection. It made me realize that sometimes you need to create media to understand it” (Callie, Spring 2019).</p> <p>“Visual journaling at first seemed like a silly idea but grew on me. They allowed me to get my thoughts onto paper and express my emotions in a different way” (Jason, Spring 2019).</p> |
| Critiques | | <p>“At times, I felt as if the topics and prompts were too limiting. I found myself driving away from the original topic and doing things a little differently than the given example. Part of that may be due to my contradictory and outside of the box nature, but also I do feel as if my other classmates stopped at the example and didn’t think to go any further” (Eloise Spring 2019).</p> |

Together, students' comments regarding visual journaling were positive. They commonly reported feelings of enjoyment to be working with visuals in a hands-on manner, along with a heightened sense of engagement and investment in the class. They remarked on how the process of visual journaling required deep thinking, compelling them to be intentional about how they represented their ideas and facilitating better recall and retention of course concepts.

On the other side of the desk, my lesson planning documents revealed a struggle with time. While I planned each activity for only fifteen or twenty minutes of class time, students regularly required more time. Some students completed the task in ten minutes, while others would just be getting started at the end of the allotted period. While my use of creative constraints, such as restricting the medium or using a specified prompt, were intended to facilitate student success within the allocated time, it was challenging to enforce these constraints while also trying to invite thoughtful expression. It seemed that visual journaling, as a pedagogy, was subject to similar pressures as digital media production and this, again, exacerbated the already full curriculum. Along with this, because I did not require written explanations of students' journaling, I was unable to gauge if or how these activities impacted their emerging course knowledge or perspectives. While I would invite sharing, the time constraints of the class prevented all twenty students from sharing. Relatedly, I noticed that students' online discussion responses to assigned course readings lacked reflection. Building knowledge via readings and online discussions in our learning management system (LMS) were important dimensions of my course. In the discussion section, I examine these aspects of the reflecting phase and describe my revisions.

DISCUSSION

In this section, I situate my action research in the overlapping spaces of multiple scholarly fields, offering a discussion of the theoretical implications related to agenda and agency in visual journaling as production in media literacy. I close by sharing the curricular revisions I plan to make in addressing the selected curriculum issues described in the reflecting section.

Audiencing

From my findings, I have identified *audiencing* as an important phenomenon arising from visual journaling in the context of media literacy. Fiske (1994) used the term audiencing in his cultural studies research to understand television audiences and TV watching, particularly, how audiences negotiate content based on their circumstances. Rose (2016) expands on Fiske's work with television, a mostly linear medium, applying it to contemporary networked media, explaining "a further aspect of audiencing involves audiences developing meanings by producing their own materials" (p. 41). She exemplifies the nonlinear aspects of audiencing possible with new media by highlighting the work of Henry Jenkins (2009). Audiences develop meanings by *reworking* the narratives, characters, and plots of their favorite popular culture stories, generally through fan fiction, cosplay, and related fandom activities (p. 41). In my research, linking the concept of audiencing to arts-based research and visual journaling. Scott Shields (2016) explains, "When an artist creates, it is often someone else who interprets, but in creative inquiry in the visual journal, the producer is also the perceiver" (p. 7). In reading across the scholarly fields of media literacy, arts-based inquiry, cultural studies, and visual methodologies, I became alerted to the opportunities visual journaling offered my students for audiencing by situating them simultaneously in the shoes of the media maker and the audience. Thus, beyond production alone, the implications of creating in a visual journal in the context of media literacy may also be to cultivate attention to alternative forms of knowing and expressing knowledge with regards to the interplay of agenda and agency possible in media making.

To clarify this interplay, I revisited my journal pages as data. Figure 5 represents an extraction from a series of rough sketches not pictured here. My reflexive inquiry in my own visual journal invited me to realize audiencing as not only a production process, but also as an agentive process of self-expression. Figure 5 shows visual journaling at the nexus of analysis and production in media literacy learning, revealing how the use of visual journals enables a simultaneous critical experience of interpretation and production.

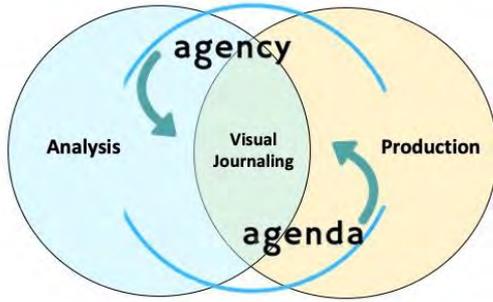


Figure 5. *Agenda and Agency. Visual journaling sits at the interplay of analysis and production and of agenda and agency in media literacy classroom practice.*

The interplay is contained by a tension between agenda and agency, represented not only by a focus on decoding agenda that is prominent in media literacy curricula, but also by the agenda of teachers that may inhibit authentic critical interpretation during classroom analysis exercises.

Agency is reciprocal to the presence of agenda, and visual journaling serves to open students to use their own voice and expressions of knowledge that may expand beyond what the instructor has presented. Likewise, as future media makers, the concept of agency explored in the course curriculum regarding counter narrative production is included as well. Beyond the theoretical insights into audiencing achieved through my study, I have identified three implications of visual journaling for agentive knowledge building, negotiation of learning, and expression in the context of media literacy practice that I describe in the next segment.

Visual journaling and agency

My research reveals visual journaling as a manageable and accessible production process that augments learning, while also inviting students into the role of media maker in a way that democratizes the classroom space.

First, visual journaling invites students to access media forms for production with which they are comfortable and familiar and this may enhance their expressive capacity to convey knowledge, perspectives, ideas, and expertise. Barone and Eisner (2012) explain, “There are... a variety of forms of representation available to enrich what one can come to question or to know” (p. 47). For instance, in the found poem activity, students were invited to negotiate a chapter from W. James Potter’s (2004) text, *Theory of Media Literacy: A*

Cognitive Approach. Given rapidly changing media culture, this excerpt was dated. Nonetheless, with the expressive potentialities of visual journaling and the found poem strategy, students were able to pick up where Potter left off as they leveraged old materials to convey new ideas. Figure 6 shows a found idea piece created by a student in fall 2018 that simply reads “its sheer magnitude forces us into rallying.” When invited to share, the student explained how pervasive media was in his life, and how he had recently taken a social media break. This action, or “rallying,” was expressed via a text created long before social media was common parlance.

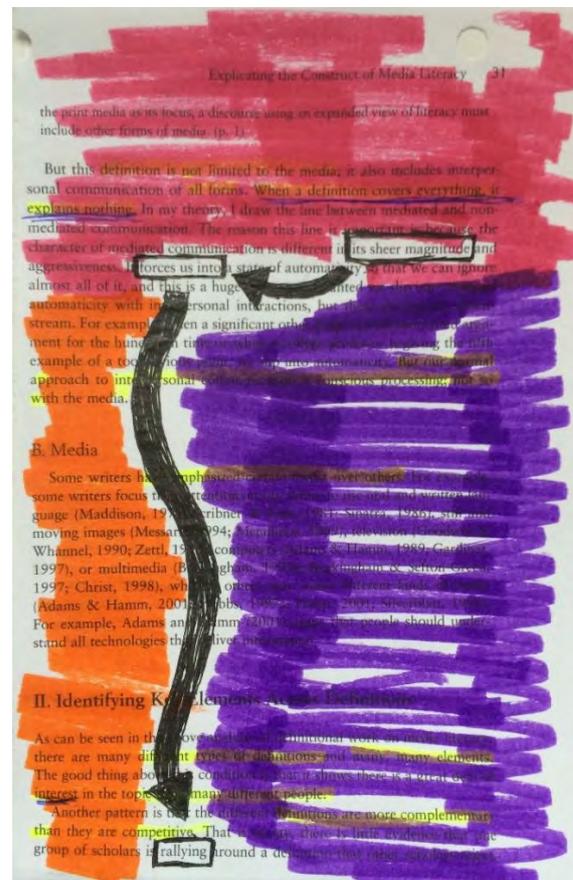


Figure 6. *Found idea. Journaling enables students to negotiate knowledge based on their own experiences*

Second, visual journaling helps to disrupt interpretive power structures in classroom decoding exercises while also encouraging students to negotiate identities, culture, economics, and personal experiences. For example, when interpreting media in my class, I use active questioning to facilitate student-centered class

decoding. Even with this pedagogical practice, students will sometimes engage in guesswork to determine what the teacher, who is in a position of power, is seeking from them in terms of response. In contrast, visual journaling, as Cate shared, puts students “into the driver’s seat of [their own] education by creating and constructing according to [their] own thoughts and ideas” (Interview, Spring 2019). While this agency has been observed in arts-based inquiry, uplifting student voice in media literacy contexts can be a challenge. Barone and Eisner (2012) explain, “One important attribute of works of art, and arts-based research, can be their capacity for enhancing alternative meanings that adhere to social phenomena, thereby undercutting the authority of the master narrative” (p. 124). By engaging in visual journaling, students produced alternative meanings. In the context of class, the primary power structure of the instructor and her expertise is disrupted in favor of student voice.

Third, arts-based inquiry in media literacy via the visual journal may expand pathways of engagement for students to access learning and express their developing knowledge in anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive ways (Simons & Hicks, 2006). In the context of this study, students engaged in visual journaling using a common set of materials in a set period of time with options to share. In their remarks, they describe their comfort sharing even if topics were challenging or controversial. Wendy explained, “Hearing what other people came up with allowed me to hear about controversial media constructs that I potentially wouldn’t have before” (Interview, spring 2019), while Troy elaborated “...it helped show people’s creative sides as well as what their true opinions might be because they might not have wanted to share in front of the entire class” (Interview, spring 2019). In this way, student-produced ways of knowing emerged as an inclusive teaching and learning practices to cultivate anti-oppressive classroom exchange.

Revisions

Visual journaling was not without challenges. As previewed earlier, allocated class time for journaling tended to bloat, students expression was sometimes constrained by instructor provided examples, and a lack of opportunities for reflection clouded instructor insight into student learning. Separate from our visual journaling activities, I struggled to

engage students’ critical attention to outside-of-class readings and responses. In preparing revisions for the following academic year, I reconceptualized the uses of visual journaling to address these problems. Primarily, I adjusted our outside-of-class reading response conversations by situating visual journaling at the core of these online discussions. While reporting on the outcomes of these revisions is beyond the scope of this article, I will foreground my plans here.

In the reconceptualized exercise, students would read course materials, remix the content, reflect on and explain their remixes, and share these visuals in our LMS, commenting on the collective work of the class community. In short, students would:

1. *Engage* with the reading thoughtfully by taking notes on key ideas, pulling salient quotes, pondering, reflecting, and wondering.
2. *Express* ideas in a transformative remix. Digitize and share their remix in the conversation forum of our LMS.
3. *Explain* ideas by providing a detailed explanation of their remix, adding a title or caption along with the written explanation, and making sure to describe not only how the remix relates to key ideas from the readings, but also how the creative choices illustrate these relationships.
4. *Extend* by replying to two classmates.

I rebranded the process as *remix journaling* and the revision includes three main benefits.

First, by expanding visual journaling as remix where the deliverable was digitized, I was able to augment accessible expressive opportunities for students beyond physical art materials. In remix journaling, students could draw from the expressive potentialities and diverse cultural forms of a vast array of individually-created or online source texts, including popular media. Students might also incorporate multiple media forms, such as sound and video, into their remixes. Rhodes and Robnolt (2009) explain, “schooling continues to be based on hierarchical access to paper-based literacy instead of practices that allow students to explore and utilize the multimodal, non-linear literacies available in digital environments” (p. 158). Remix journaling may open up opportunities to incorporate digital environments along with lessons about copyright, fair use, and appropriation as popular media texts could be used as fodder in new ways.

Second, by shifting the space of production from our class meeting time to an outside-of-class assignment, I was able to enhance student agency and curb the possibility of them creating in restrictive ways that followed instructor models. Through this, student agency was not only augmented, but also, I gained valuable insights into students' prior knowledge, perspectives, misconceptions, and digital competencies.

Third, by requiring a written, text-based explanation to accompany their creative works, I gained insight into students' interpretation and negotiation of course topics and ideas. Kraehe and Brown (2011) explain that:

“asking students to talk about how they felt when creating or doing an activity in the classroom or having students discuss their experiences in small groups that later share back to the instructor would offer vital information to those who want to strengthen and reflect on their teaching.” (p. 507)

In this way, because the reflection needed to address not only course content in their remix, but also the creative choices they made, students and instructor alike developed a reflective capacity in identifying the characteristics of transformative media content.

CONCLUSION

Addressing media production in an already crowded curriculum can be technically intensive, requiring hours of class time to advance students from concept to post production. For teachers who face curricular constraints or have unreliable access to digital tools and software, arts-based methods such as visual journaling or remix journaling, may be a fruitful pedagogical approach. As Buckingham (2007) explains, “whether or not the potential of digital production is realized is not simply a matter of the technology: it is primarily a question of pedagogy” (p. 171).

As a pedagogy, visual or remix journaling situates students at the heart of an accessible learning process that facilitates an equitable and authentic classroom culture and prepares them for a more critical and creative future.

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