

# The art of 'learning by doing'

Susan Takata and Jeanne Curran explain the value of using visual teaching tools.

In this article we explore a visual teaching tool that has enabled us to implement Dewey's advice on 'learning by DOING'. Our undergraduate criminal justice students create art, poetry, design a game, make a model, whatever they choose, in accord with their individual interests and skills. This serves to embed their learning into their own experiences, and encourages them to express and explore beliefs and ideologies in relation to that learning.

*Students share their creative project work in class discussions. Bookmarks or note cards (i.e. mementos), are collaboratively prepared to share the experience with others, either informally with friends, colleagues, and family, or in a more formal exhibition, as invitations or mementos. This stage of the process begins to establish links between formal learning and the community context in which that learning will bear fruit.*

## Encouraging critical thinking

Words and text reflect special interest groups and ideologies. Text books have a tendency to encourage 'right' answers – often at the back of the book.

Visual imagery encourages the kind of critical perspective our schools have found it so hard to engender through the traditional curriculum. There is enough ambiguity of interpretation in judging what we make ourselves that one may make bold to think for oneself. How can anyone insist with authority what marks upon paper or in any other medium 'signify'?

Respect for different interpretations is encouraged when encountering the creative product that admits of many interpretations, depending on the individual's unique

personal experiences. Such respect must also recognise other interpretations where difference and ambiguity and tentative feelings are explored. One of our purposes is to nurture this critical and unique search for one's own perspective.

The creative making of something that expresses our feelings and reactions to what we are studying or exploring is the tool through which we teach, not the focus itself of our teaching. That's one reason it's important to us to use skills the students have already developed, or want very much to develop. We made the leap from limiting our use of paper and art tools to using yarn, after a six-year-old at a Challenger Boys and Girls Club asked if we

would teach her to knit. We included the designing of games, after students did it on their own and others liked the idea.

## Collaborative class drawings: a technique that has worked for us

Collaborative class drawing is a technique in which we use imagery to make it easier to talk about crucial social issues. Direct eye contact is difficult for many people, especially when talking about topics not generally acceptable for 'polite' discussion. Race is one of those topics. A visual object of some sort, like an exhibited project, or even a bookmark, gives one a reason to look not directly at the class, the teacher or the others to whom one is speaking, but focus on a safe and neutral object. This helps considerably to reduce the emotional affect that accompanies such discussions.

We experimented with collaborative class drawings in several different criminal justice courses, such as 'Race, Crime, Law', and 'Law and Social Change'. We



asked our students to draw whatever images came to them, based on their class discussions. Each student had ten seconds to contribute to the class drawing.

**Stick figures**

Many of our students hadn't attempted drawing since grammar school. They often resorted to stick figures to represent people. The time allowed was severely limited, but that drew on some of the advantages of word association, when we wanted the first image that came into their minds.

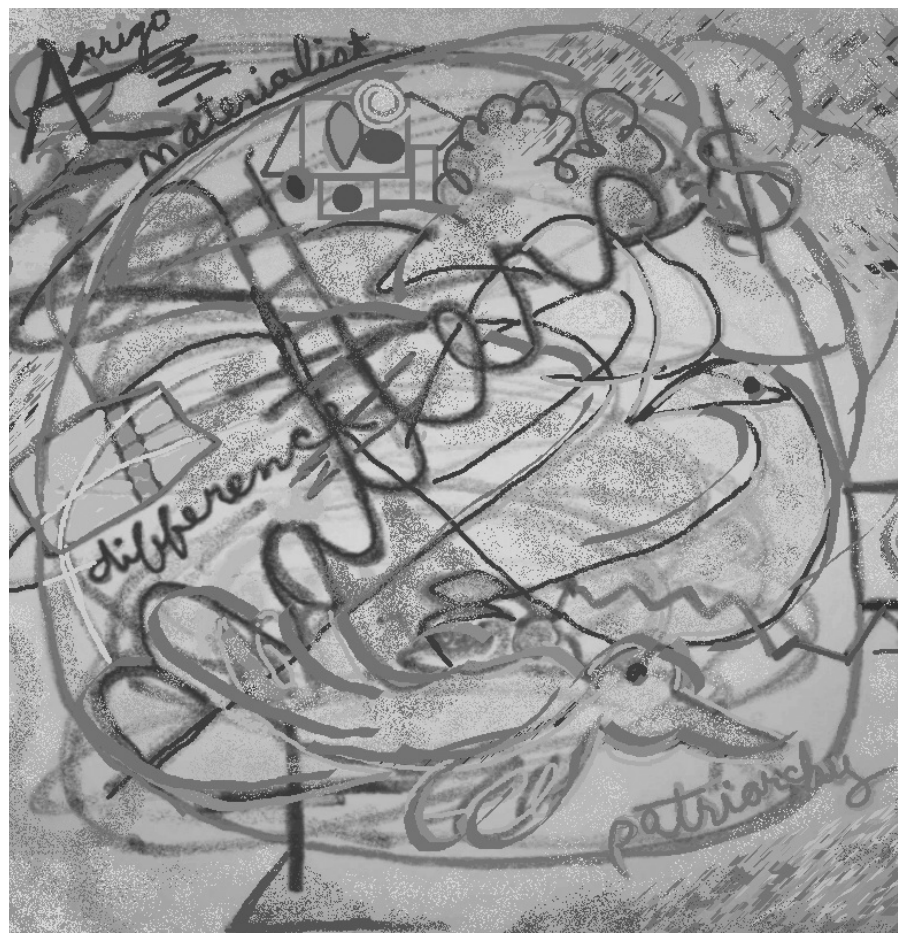
It is revealing to see what stands out most in the students' minds from the course. In a Race, Crime, Law course, the images were striking: 'crt' stood for 'Critical Race Theory'. Stick figures behind bars were drawn in both black and brown ink. Our students were quick to invent a way to illustrate the issue of race. They used different colours for the stick figures. One plausible interpretation of this aspect of their drawing is that the importance of race in criminal justice was uppermost in their minds.



In a Race, Crime, Law course, a white police car is chasing a red car with 'driving while black' written near the image. In the Law and Social Change collaborative class drawing, the students reveal issues most relevant to them: capital punishment signified by the gurney where lethal injections take place, a gun fired, a family drawn as stick figures to illustrate family values, and so forth.

**Adding vibrant colour**

Critiquing their drawing offered the occasion to introduce a quick technique: the use of vibrant colour to focus the eye on specific sections of the drawing. We presented the altered drawing in a later class, though we took the liberty of changing the orange we had interpreted as brown to an actual brown colour instead of the more ambiguous orange in the original drawing.



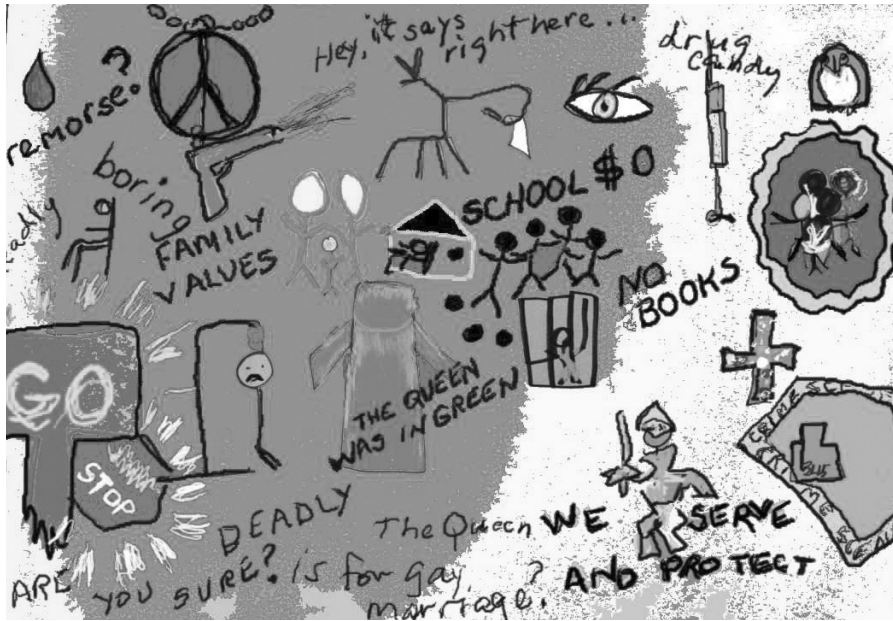
**Creating mementos**

It was simple to create small mementos, like bookmarks, just by cropping their collaborative drawings. When we gave the students the bookmarks to distribute and advertise the exhibition, they were so very proud of their collaborative artwork that they did not want to give the bookmarks away. They wanted to keep them for themselves. We had to print a whole new batch of bookmarks for advertisement and distribution!

The bookmarks became a way for students to initiate discussion on some of the issues discussed in class, sharing their learning with spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, parents, grandparents, roommates, co-workers, and others. These were important contacts in their network of support, who cared about their success in school.

**Students add their own vibrant colour**

Posters were equally easy to print from their collaborative drawings,



and in collaborative work there was no favouritism as to whose work was printed. Posters attract attention in hallways, small offices, and student bedrooms, etc. Sometimes we can prevail upon friends and family to post them where they're sure to be seen. They serve to advertise both on campus and in the local community what students are learning. Sometimes the posters are pretty specific, as specific allusions to Arrigo's (1999) text and, by implication, critical theory. But the 'primitive' nature of their collaborative drawings makes them seem normal in today's world of 'funky' and popular art in fashion and everything else.

As a bookmark or matted wall decoration this memento might well serve to embed the concept alluded to in our everyday thinking. It might also serve to cheer us up when the going gets tough. Bright vibrant colour is guaranteed to wake up an exhausted student. Well, maybe not after a cramming session, but most of the time.

### Summary and conclusions

Projects, arts, crafts, making things, doing things, learning things, especially if we get to choose projects that interest us, are fun. We like to do them. Doing things we like to do makes us feel more trusting and more comfortable talking to

one another. When we use them in connection with our learning, we also build links to that learning.

The sharing of our projects across both town and gown is a practical beginning for merging generally separate networks into a functional support network for the passing on of both theoretical and practical knowledge of how to get done the things that today's communities need to get done. Praxis becomes accountability. ■

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