Family Photos as Catalysts for Writing: A Pedagogical Exercise in Visual Analysis with MA Students

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Abstract : This paper explores a pedagogical exercise that employs family photos as catalysts for teaching visual analysis and inspiring academic writing among MA students. The study aimed to achieve two primary objectives: to impart students with the skills of analyzing images or artifacts and to ignite their writing for research purposes. Conducted at Viana Polytechnic in Portugal, the exercise involved two classes on Arts Management and Art Education Master course comprising approximately twenty students from diverse academic backgrounds, including Economics, Design, Fine Arts, and Sociology, among others. The exploratory exercise involved selecting an old family photo, analyzing its content and context, and deconstructing the chosen images in an intuitive and systematic manner. Students were encouraged to engage in photo elicitation, seeking insights from family/friends to gain multigenerational perspectives on the images. The feedback received from this exercise was consistently positive, largely due to the personal connection students felt with the objects of analysis. Family photos, with their emotional significance, fostered deeper engagement and motivation in the learning process. Furthermore, visual analysing family photos stimulated critical thinking as students interpreted the composition, subject matter, and potential meanings embedded in the images. This practice enhanced their ability to comprehend complex visual representations and construct compelling visual narratives, thereby facilitating the writing process. The exercise also facilitated the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences by comparing different family photos, leading to a more comprehensive analysis of visual elements and themes. Throughout the exercise, students found analyzing their own photographs both enjoyable and insightful. They progressed through preliminary analysis, explored content and context, and artfully interwove these components. Additionally, students experimented with various techniques such as converting photos to black and white, altering framing angles, and adjusting sizes to unveil hidden meanings. The methodology employed included observation, documental analysis of written reports, and student interviews. By including students from diverse academic backgrounds, the study enhanced its external validity, enabling a broader range of perspectives and insights during the exercise. Furthermore, encouraging students to seek multigenerational perspectives from family and friends added depth to the analysis, enriching the learning experience and broadening the understanding of the cultural and historical context associated with the family photos Highlighting the emotional significance of these family photos and the personal connection students felt with the objects of analysis fosters a deeper connection to the subject matter. Moreover, the emphasis on stimulating critical thinking through the analysis of composition, subject matter, and potential meanings in family photos suggests a targeted approach to developing analytical skills. This improvement focuses specifically on critical thinking and visual analysis, enhancing the overall quality of the exercise. Additionally, the inclusion of a step where students compare different family photos to identify patterns, similarities, and differences further enhances the depth of the analysis. This comparative approach adds a layer of complexity to the exercise, ultimately leading to a more comprehensive understanding of visual elements and themes. The expected results of this study will culminate in a set of practical recommendations for implementing this exercise in academic settings.

Keywords : visual analysis, academic writing, pedagogical exercise, family photos