Using Rich Pictures to understand students' transitions on new degree pathways

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Abstract

New pathways to university degrees, such as degree apprenticeships and direct entry from further education, challenge universities to support students to make the most of their higher education opportunities and achieve good degrees. Researching students' experience of transitioning into university in these non-traditional contexts can help universities align support with students' needs. However, researchers need to look beyond surveys to gather data, as contemporary students' lifestyles and identities, combined with survey fatigue, reduce the quantity and quality of responses. Rich Pictures, completed by students working in groups, provide a great way to gather students' perspectives, as a potentially rewarding activity, producing useful data that goes beyond researchers' preconceptions. This paper focuses on two Rich Picture studies: degree apprentices looking ahead at the beginning of their degrees; and direct entrants, looking back. The advantages and challenges of the method are presented, as well as insights into the students' transitions.

Paper

Introduction

Rich Pictures (RPs) are used to explore students' perspectives of transitioning into university along non-traditional degree pathways. In Study 1, computing degree apprentices create RPs, at the beginning of their degrees. In Study 2, computing students who entered into university (2nd or 3rd year) directly from further education (FE) college, look back on that transition. This paper addresses the research question: *What are the advantages and challenges of using Rich Pictures to gather data?* It also presents some insights into student transitions.

Transition is the process individuals go through as they internalise and come to terms with a new situation (Bridges, 1995), a negotiation between the individual and the social contexts they inhabit (Crafter & Maunder, 2012). Within Higher Education (HE), this process continues beyond entry to university (Bowles et al., 2014), while students create their new learner identity as HE students (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; MacFarlane, 2018). Students who enter HE from FE college are often the first in their family to attend university, and more likely to lack emotional security and confidence in this context, and feel disempowered and unprepared for university study (Christie et al., 2008; Hirst et al. 2004). For various reasons, direct entrants are likely to spend less time on campus (Yorke & Longden, 2004) and, like degree apprentices, only attend timetabled sessions (Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005). Rather than apply a deficit model, HEIs need to understand the experiences of these students (Haggis, 2006).

Methodology

Repertoires of methods for gathering data from students need to be expanded to align with student identities and lifestyle, as students who think of themselves as customers, or with job or caring commitments, or long commutes, are reluctant to donate "free time" to complete surveys.

RPs grew out of Soft Systems Methodology (Patching, 1990) where pictures shared with, or created by, stakeholders inform requirements analysis (Checkland, 2000). Individuals or groups are given large sheets of paper, coloured

pens, and asked to draw a situation. RPs help to surface and explore perceptions, make difficult statements possible, and support discussion (Bell, Berg, & Morse, 2016). RPs are a great way to gather students' perspectives: a potentially rewarding activity, providing opportunities for reflection. They have previously been used to capture student expectations (Berg et al., 2017). Beyond being asked to describe a situation, participants are given free rein in their drawing, enabling them to provide data that goes beyond researchers' preconceptions.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the activity and the management of their data, including the RPs; participants signed consent forms. In Study 1, degree apprentices were grouped into teams of about five, at the beginning of their course, and asked to illustrate, in a collaborative drawing: their aims, aspirations, worries; and what they hoped to get from the degree. Workshops took place with apprentices in 2017 (n=22; 5RPs) and 2018 (n=39; 8RPs). The activity also served as an induction day teambuilding exercise (Bell, Berg, & Morse, 2016). In 2017, a "mirror" workshop was conducted with on-campus 1st year computing students (n=19; 5RPs). In these three workshops, participants completed surveys individually, including questions about their aspirations and worries and aspirations, before creating RPs in groups.

Study 2 was conducted in 2019, with 3rd year computing students within a design module (n=44; 8RPs). The session also introduced RPs as a method within design. Most participants had entered university directly into 2nd or 3rd year, from FE. Students were encouraged to chat about this experience, before drawing RPs to address the differences between college and university and their progress with the transition.

In both studies, after 20 to 30 minutes, participants presented their pictures to everyone, describing their content. These presentations were audio-recorded and transcribed. Analysis follows the spirit of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying themes within the imagery (also informed by the presentations).

Insights

Degree apprenticeships combine full-time paid work with university study, leading to challenges around time-management, work-life balance, and dual identities as employee and student. The apprentices' RPs (Figure 1 to Figure 6) reflect their contexts, depicting the degree as a challenging journey or a game, with imagery of hazards, time and balance. Their brains grew on the way, but the main outcome was financial reward.

Figure 1:Degree as game, brain-growth, financial reward

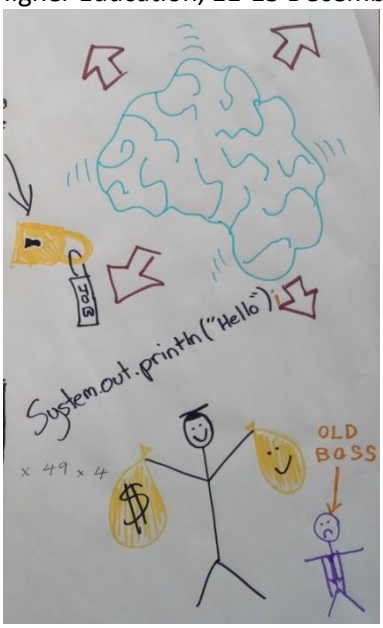

Figure 2: Brain-growth, financial reward

Figure 3: Hazardous journey, financial reward

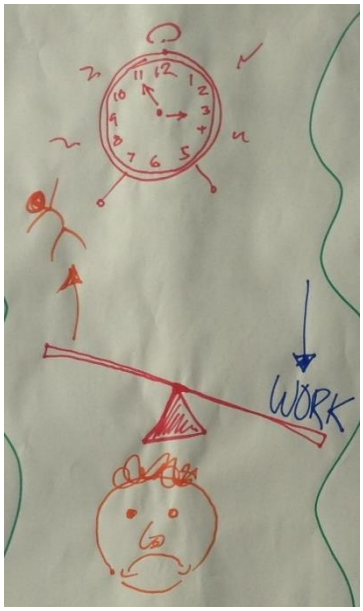

Figure 4: Time, balance

Figure 5: Hazardous journey, financial reward

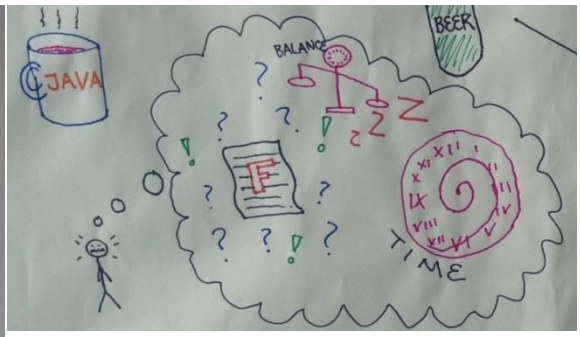

Figure 6: Time, balance

The on-campus students (Figure 7 to Figure 10) also pictured the hazardous journey or game, ending in financial reward. Crucially, they drew debt as a hazard. Debt's absence from the degree apprentices' RPs illustrates a wonderful possibility of HE without student debt. Smith et al. (2018) explore the 2017 RPs in more detail.

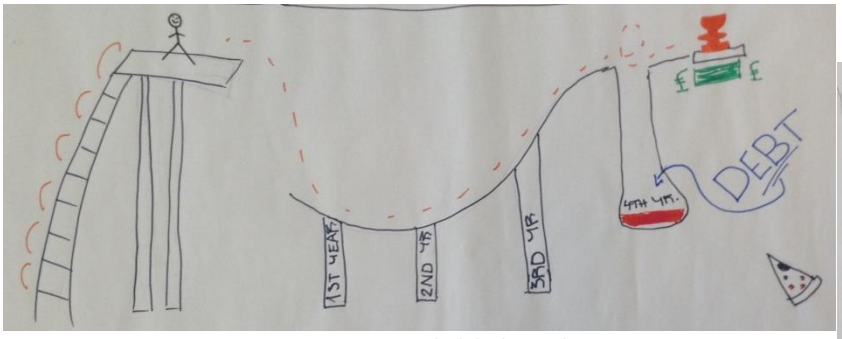

Figure 7: Game with debt hazard

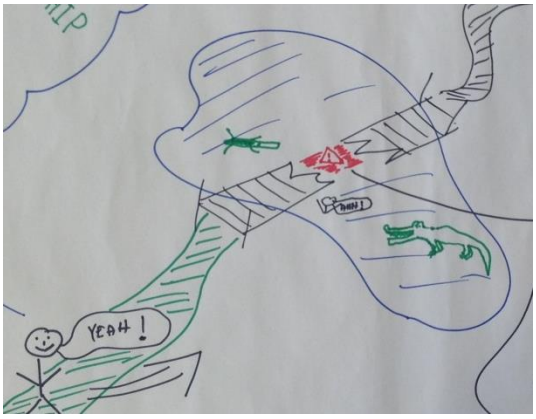

Figure 9: Journey with hazard

Figure 10: No money

Figure 8: Financial/ material reward

In Study 2, the direct entrants also drew time and money symbols to record these challenges and used journey and game imagery to organise their RPs. Their images (Figure 11 to Figure 15**Error! Reference source not found.**) illustrate how university lecturers seem more remote (e.g., in helicopters) than FE lecturers (as lifeguards); increases in workload; serious deadlines (death, the shark); and the challenges (octopus) of groupwork.

Figure 11: Remote university lecturers, Shark of Deadlines, Octopus of Groupwork

Figure 12: Groupwork

Figure 13: Workload

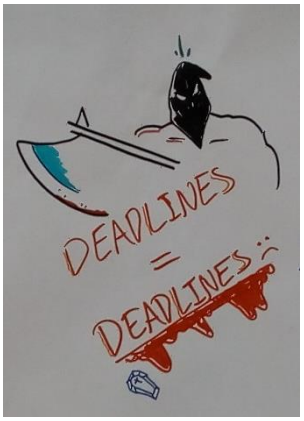

Figure 14: Deadlines

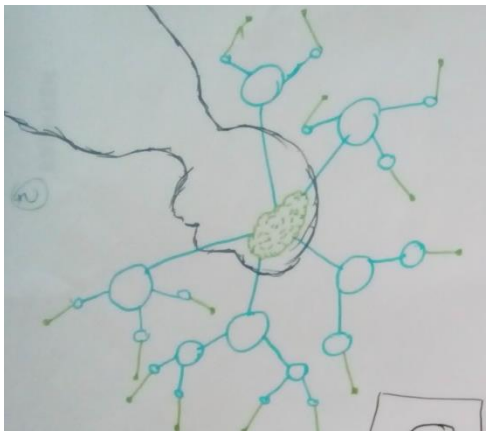

Figure 15: Brain-growth

Conclusions

These studies provide unique windows into the students' experiences. The sessions can be useful to the students, in terms of making friends, reflection, and learning research methods; so they can be scheduled within classes. RPs' vivid imagery can be easier to share with colleagues than survey statistics (e.g., the Octopus of Groupwork). There are challenges around integrating RPs with more established research methods, including describing the inductive analysis in enough detail to satisfy reviewers and not losing meaning by translating images into text. Rather, the use of diagrams to summarise research can usefully be extended to value pictures as outputs (e.g., Carruthers Thomas, 2019).

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