

## Involving EAP students in sharing their educational experience and development via arts-enriched methods

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### The context and my intentions for the course

The purpose of this article is for a group of students and me (their lecturer, Ana Inés Salvi) to jointly share our educational experience as part of a Pre-session Academic English course which was run by a British university in the students' country of origin, China, in May–June 2015. This is a 16.5-hours-per-week (plus weekly tutorials), 5-week-long course for students who will continue their studies in the UK, and thus it aims to prepare them for living and studying in the UK, with particular emphasis on developing their academic reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Our sharing of the experience will be done by presenting and explaining drawings/paintings that we created after the course to express what was significant in what we did and why. Of thirteen students who took this course in China, eleven participated in the drawing session in the UK in August 2015; one, who was in China at the time, made a drawing at a later stage; and one did not continue his studies in the UK. Five months later, eight of them and I wrote a further explanation of our drawings in preparation for this article.

The drawings are presented and explained by the students themselves as an expression of their development through the course. At the same time, the process of reflecting on the whole experience via art and explaining their drawings in writing at the end of the course was developmental in itself; that is, it offered them, and me, another opportunity to further develop themselves/ourselves. Arts-enriched research methods (Eisner, 1981, 1998, 2001, 2008; HEA, 2014), specifically, drawings, were deployed in an attempt to 'capture the ineffable and hard-to-put-into-words' (Weber, 2008), to 'inspire creative thought' (McNiff, 2008: 32), to 'challenge [...] the dominant, entrenched academic community and its claims to scientific ways of knowing' (Finley, 2008: 72), and 'to go beyond a verbal mode of thinking, [and which] may help include wider dimensions of experience, which one would perhaps neglect otherwise' (Bagnoli, 2009: 565).

After the course had finished and the students had arrived in the UK, and had completed a second pre-session course with other lecturers, we convened in a university classroom to reflect on the educational experience in China, more specifically both on what had been significant for each of us in what we had done and on why, via drawings. I explained to them that the purpose of doing this was to develop ourselves as practitioners (Allwright and Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2015a, b), that is to say, to continue learning about ourselves by reflecting on our past learning experience. Regarding using artful ways of expressing ourselves, I explained that perhaps through art we could express thoughts and memories that would otherwise be either hard to articulate (Knowles and Cole, 2008: 44) or in our subconscious. At the same

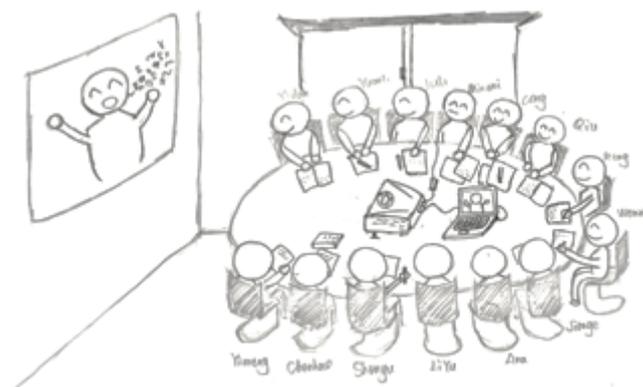
time, they were aware that this data was to be used for a two-fold purpose: firstly, for a doctoral study I am conducting to seek understanding of criticality development (McPeck, 1981; Brown, 1998; Freire, 1973, 1996; Benesch, 2001, 2009; Chun, 2015; Barnett, 1997; Johnston et al., 2011) in my own EAP practice; and, secondly, as the starting point to jointly writing a journal article to share our educational experience with other practitioners around the world.

In the reflective drawing session that was held in the UK two months after the course, a video camera was placed in a corner of the classroom. Individual desks were arranged to form one long table. Art supplies including watercolour pencils, acrylic paint sets, cartridge paper, and a number and alphabet stamp set were offered as optional tools on a side table. After greetings of one another, everyone sat by the table and I wrote two questions to guide students' reflection, on the whiteboard: 'What was significant in what we did for you?' and 'Why?'. I also suggested that they could brainstorm ideas first and could work either individually or in small groups. They organised themselves and started to work. After an hour I suggested that we should all talk about our drawings. This lasted for an hour, after which we all went out for dinner as we had planned. Two weeks later I contacted participants via email to share the video with them and ask them whether they would be interested in sending me a transcript of their talk about their own drawing, which they could expand on if they wished to in preparation for the joint writing project. Five months later, while some of them had made a transcript and explained it further, some others had directly used their drawing as the basis for writing differently about their experience.

### **Drawings, transcripts of talk about drawings and/or explanations of drawings**

In what follows, my students present their drawings, a transcript of their talk about their drawing during the drawing session, and/or further reflections in writing. What they have drawn and what they say and write reflect what was significant for them from the educational EAP experience they had had two months before. These are the students' visual, (transcribed) oral and written accounts of that experience, which, put together, make a picture of the event as a whole from their perspectives, with my own commentary in italics.

*The first drawing is by Chenhao. First, he presents a transcription of his talk about his drawing, which is a reflection on the value of students learning from one another through watching and evaluating one another's spoken and visual work in class. He refers to a class when they watched and evaluated one another's self-video-recorded introductions of themselves in class.*



**Chenhao:** In the video-recorded drawing session, I say: "This picture shows the situation where all of us are watching a short video of Cong introducing himself, in class. Cong gave us a good presentation. We listened carefully and then gave some feedback to him. I think this activity was significant because it helped us all improve our spoken English and also our feedback to him was meaningful to help him and us make a better performance. When we listened to others giving a presentation, we practised listening and at the same time everybody had a chance to compare themselves with one another and therefore for further improvement."

I ask my classmates: "Has anyone got any questions?"

Cong says: "I still remember this was my first time to give a presentation. I was so nervous at the time. But from that practice, I did make progress with my speaking English and this is really significant for me."

Minwei says: "Whose presentation [self-video-recorded introduction] was best, do you think?"

I reply: "It might be Cong's. In my mind, he spoke fluently, and full of confidence. It was a good example for everybody."

*After transcribing what he had said about his own drawing during the drawing session, Chenhao reflects on a second meaningful moment for him when they played a dictionary game at the end of a class, and reflects on the importance of students enjoying themselves and playing while learning:*

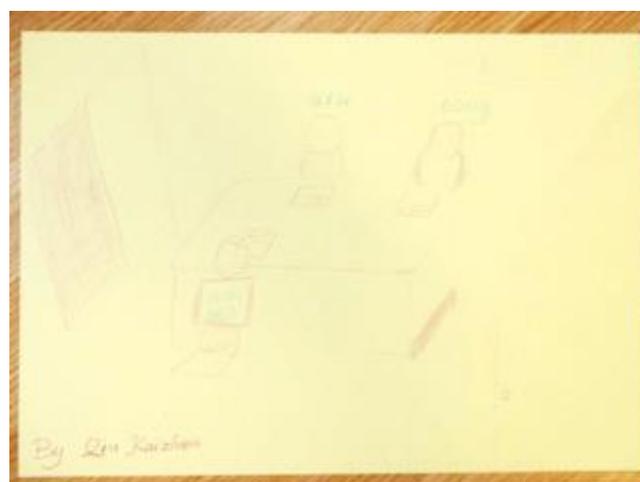
**Chenhao:** The dictionary game was good in our leisure time. All of us divided ourselves into two groups. We chose one person from our group to find a word, which had to be neither too difficult nor too easy, in a dictionary outside of the classroom. Then that person came in and using their own words had to describe the word for the others to guess. If the group got the right answer in time they got one point. If not, the other group had a chance to guess and score. This game is a good exercise not only for our ability to organize sentences, but also for testing our vocabulary. But the most important point is that it arouses enthusiasm for scoring and thus all of us are immersed in cheers and laughter.

*The second drawing is by Cong. He reflects on the value of intercultural exchanges, of having an opportunity to exchange experiences with a lecturer from abroad. He highlights having learned new and creative ways of learning and communicating.*



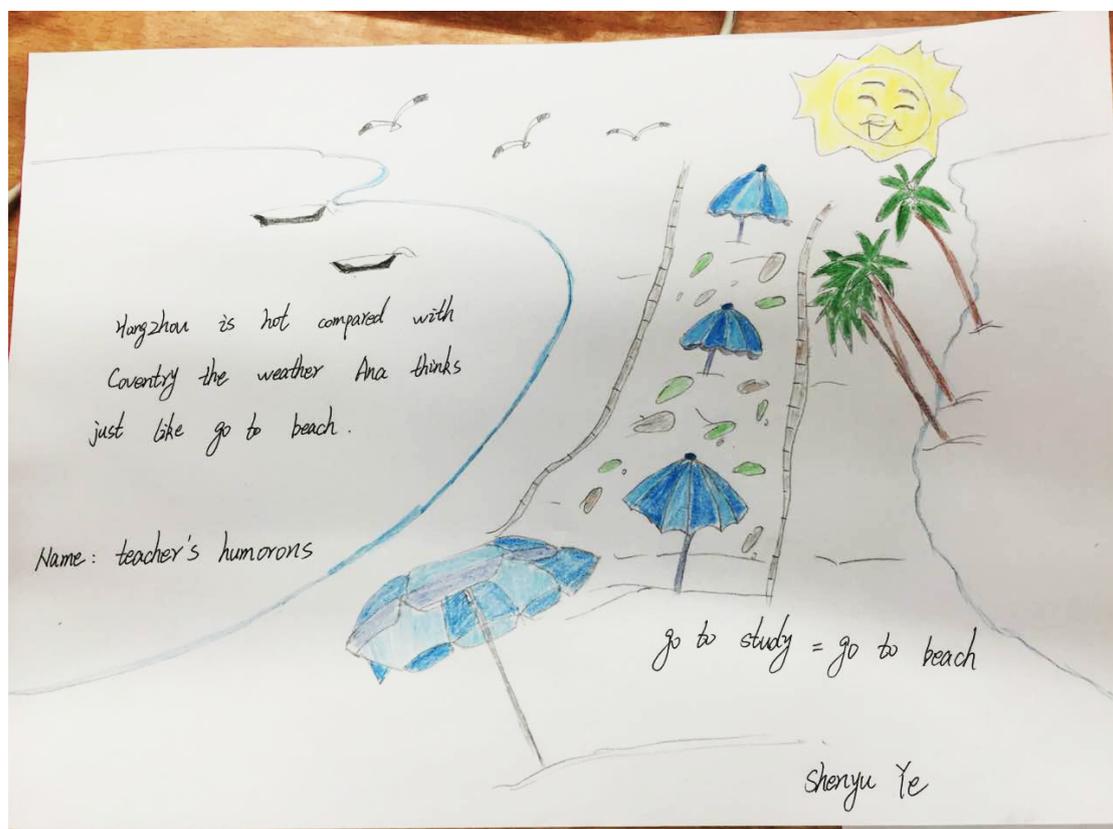
**Cong:** I am so lucky to have met my favourite teacher Ana in China. She showed me a lot of excellent ways to learn and allowed me to study creatively in her class. We built a deep friendship in Hangzhou and I have been willing to share thoughts and experiences both about my life and study with her. She is a really patient and excellent teacher. A few months after the course, I still miss that wonderful time in Hangzhou.

*The third drawing is by Kaizhen. He describes his drawing and explains what it represents. He refers to one of the times when they were invited to choose what to work on from the material provided, according to their interests and needs, to work with those classmates that had chosen the same material, and to share what they had done, including their questions, doubts and new learning, with the rest of the class. He reflects on discovering joy in self-directed and cooperative learning.*



**Kaizhen:** This picture describes an afternoon in Hangzhou last summer. It was an impressive language class in which our lovely teacher Ana allowed us to pick one task we were interested in. What I drew was the room next to the main classroom. Cong, Shenyu and I chose the same task so we went to that room for self-study. Although it was quite hot in that room, we worked hard and did well; cooperative learning made us enjoy learning and impressed me a lot. After that, we worked out the task and made a successful presentation for other classmates who worked on other tasks. This kind of new learning method is really helpful and made me enjoy the experience during that summer. I suppose this picture is a sign and a reminder of those happy learning days.

*The next two drawings, by Shenyu, depict a significant moment for him, which occurred in dialogue with the lecturer outside of the classroom between sessions, and which refers to the role of the lecturer, the lecturer-student relationship, and different, imaginative and playful ways of being. When writing about the drawings, he also mentions another memorable event for him, which he has not drawn, also including the lecturer and her being integrated with them in informal activities outside of the classroom. Both episodes happen outside of the classroom at break time and are about the lecturer-student relationship, playfulness and imagination, and above all about encountering difference, that is, noticing culturally different ways of being, behaving, thinking and knowing.*



**Shenyu:** The most impressive moments for me were two. The first one was when we played the Chinese traditional game called 'The eagle seizes the chicken' together. Ana was a totally different teacher from the teachers I had met before, because we played games together even in the relaxing time. Her smile and her yellow clothes were very suited for that day's sunshine. The second one [represented in the pictures] is a lovely joke. Due to the warm weather in Hangzhou, which is rare in England, Ana told me on the way from the restaurant where we had had lunch to our classroom that she was imagining we were walking to the beach. What a cute and lovely teacher!



*The next one is a jointly made drawing. Four of the students reflect about their drawing in writing below. The first one is by Yimeng for whom getting to know about each other and becoming empowered were among her most cherished gains in the EAP course.*

Yimeng (asking my classmates and pointing at the drawing): "Do you notice that coffee? This is Ana's."

Yimeng: "Do you still remember the dictionary?"

Classmates: "Of course."

Yimeng: "We played the game using it."

Classmates: "Yeah, yeah" (happy)

Yimeng: "Do you still remember the bottle of water? It is Shenyu's - because

he always drank water."

It is really a nice experience for me. We took classes together in Hangzhou for five weeks and then we met in the UK. To begin with, although we are all from China we did not know each other, as we come from different areas. As time went by, we gradually got to know the habits and strong points of each other. Luckily, we could also meet you, Ana, who helped us develop coagulative [solid] power. During the studying time in Hangzhou, we studied together and played together, building a strong friendship with each other. I really cherish the time with all my friends. Many thanks to you, Ana, and to the company and help of my friends.

*The next one is Yidan's reflection. For her, cooperative learning, friendship development, and a 'family' atmosphere were among the most significant gains from this educative experience*



**Yidan:** In this summer, my classmates and I who studied together in June met with Ana in the UK and recalled the wonderful learning life in Hangzhou. This is a very warm memory. We drew the different paintings to express our same beautiful memories. We were several girls who painted a picture of the classroom environment, which includes our sitting locations, names, which are written in capital letters, and items on the table. Besides, the name 'Ana' has two love hearts, which represent her being our beloved teacher and

friend. This picture means that this room was full of our friendship and cooperation during the period of studying. In addition to this, there is the word 'FAMILY' in capital letters in the picture, which implies that, although we only studied for one month together, we are a 'family' forever!! I believe I will remember this unforgettable studying experience all the time.

*Below is Wenxin's reflection on the experience as reflected in her drawing. Developing growing confidence to share her own views in public and doing different tasks at the same time were among her most significant gains from the EAP course.*

**Wenxin:** During the five weeks PSE lesson in Hangzhou, I have met lots of friends and have learned many English skills. Ana was a very good teacher; she gave us a very good learning environment.

I felt very nervous in the first class and I was afraid of speaking English in front of everyone. I can still remember the first time I did the presentation in a group: I put my head behind the paper while I was talking. When we finished the presentation, Ana told us that we shouldn't be nervous; we had done a good job. Also she told us we should be confident when we give a presentation. Whether the presentation was good or not we should have a proper etiquette and let our audience think we are confident enough.

We had different lessons everyday, such as listening, reading and speaking. Usually when the class began, we were first divided in several groups and did different tasks. Ana asked us to change the group everyday, so that we could talk to different people and know each other. It was great; because of this, we established a deep friendship. Then we discussed the questions in groups and shared our own opinion. After that, we did a brief presentation to explain our point of view to the rest of the class. After we finished, the other groups gave us some feedback and we discussed together.

It was a good way to improve our English speaking. I wasn't afraid of doing the presentation anymore.

Five classmates and I have drawn a picture together. The drawing is of the classroom; in it everyone is sitting around a table. We are watching a presentation that we had shot at home to introduce ourselves. Ana drinks coffee every day, so we drew a coffee cup on the table. There are also some pens and books on the table, too.

We have spent many happy hours with Ana in Hangzhou; it was an unforgettable memory in my life.



time.

You are patient and conscientious. I like your teaching style; it can let us learn more knowledge in class. I also love your smile, which made me feel confident when I felt a bit nervous. I have learnt many things in your classes! I wish I can see you again in the future. I am very happy to be able to know Ana and my classmates.

*The last drawing is mine, the lecturer's. I first present a transcription of my talk about my drawing and afterwards add a concluding summary of it. I highlight building understanding of each other, of one's own learning and of the experience inside and outside of the classroom as significant gains.*



Ana: Looking at the poster I asked the students: "So, what do you think? "

Shenyu: "It's very artistic. "

Everyone: "Wow!! "

Ana: "What's that? " (pointing at 'your dreams' in the painting)

Chenhao: "What's your dream!?" "

Ana: "My dream? Mhhhh how interesting! I don't know what my dream is [...] I am thinking what my dream is. But definitely this is part of my dream, you know, to be here with you and to have this experience is definitely my dream. But what I wanted to say about this - because this is 'your dreams'- so what I wanted to say is that for me... do you know what this is? " (pointing at the drawing)

Everyone: "Mouths! "

Ana: "Yes, it's all your mouths, and all the things you wanted to tell me. You

wanted to tell me your dreams, your fears, your questions, your stories, your experiences. All of you trusted me in telling me all of these things. That was something really really meaningful to me. And at the same time, what are these? " (pointing at the drawing)

Everyone: "*Hands!*"

Ana: "Yes, and I felt that you were all giving me your hands and offering help; whatever you need, Ana, I can give it to you. I can help you to find your way, help you to book a train, help you to book a taxi, help you to watch a movie, all of you helped me somehow with lots of things."

(Pointing at *the mouths* in the poster) "This is connected to something you all told me: with Suzho to get to know China; [with] economics, well, in a tutorial, he (looking at Chenhao) trusted me and said 'I would like to know more about economics'. He told me 'I am going to study economics but I want to know more [about it], what can I do?'. So this has to do with this as well. Then the cakes: you (looking at Yidan) shared with us your dreams about making cakes. Then you (looking at Kaizhen) told me about your sister and travelling, learning abroad and all these experiences, also about Sanya; he gave me all this information. The movies that you (JuLi) shared with me; the taxi that you (YuanLi) offered; the trick she (Yimeng) played on me. She is quite serious in class and she called me and played this game and hit me on the nose. This is hilarious. You showed me who you are, not only responsible and all that but also other things; your (Yimeng's) interest in maths; question tags (looking at Shenyu), do you remember when we had this conversation outside of the classroom ..."

Shenyu: "ahhh I remember this but I forgot how to answer the question. "

Ana: "So ... do you remember that he explained that it's different..."

Everyone: "yeah, yeah"

Ana: "we are going for dinner tonight, "

Ana: "aren't we? "

Shenyu: "isn't it? "

(Everyone laughs)

Shenyu to his classmates: "How should I answer? "

Everyone: "Yes! "

Ana: "Yes, we are. "

Everyone: "Yes, we are. "

Reading my poster, I say: "*Wanting to help others'*. Do you remember? This happened after the class. Do you remember that he (looking at Minwei) invited someone that he wanted to help to the group, to the WeChat group? "

Everyone: "Yeah. "

Ana: "That is also something very positive, you know, that he considered this a community, a place to learn, to help each other, and I think that is something really nice. "

(Looking at the poster) "Anyway, and lots of other things. Of course, these are a few but all of you ... (Looking at the drawing again) I included *trees*. Do you remember Chenhao's presentation? "

Chenhao: "Yes! "

Ana: "We were all like 'wow'. Some of you were saying 'I want to become this and that' and he said 'I want to take care of the trees'. I think that was quite moving. And then (pointing at the poster) music. Well, JuLi and Jiange, both of you, in a way, Jiange, singing and all that, he is also showing your culture to me and also as a way of ... , because that is something you organised, I didn't have any input on it. You said: 'He arrived late; he has to sing'. It was your decision and it was great, showing me something that you do and you enjoy. That was really nice.

Also JuLi, when you sent me an email the first week telling me about yourselves (pause) she said something about enjoying - maybe it wasn't her; I cannot remember now who said this - listening to jazz *music*, and I thought that that really relaxes you, and at that moment, I had forgotten about listening to music to have fun. This is significant for me because it reminded me that I could have music and be happy..."

Everyone: "yeah..."

Ana: "thought 'they are reminding me of something I have forgotten about'. And finally (pointing at the poster) these are ... you have lots of ideas; you have suggestions to improve the way we learn, to learn more, to be effective in the classroom; you sent me emails; you took control to do all that, to learn together better; and I think that showed how important learning is for all of us, how serious you were; and you took learning seriously. I think this is really important. (Reading the poster) '*Engagement*' and you saying ... So I think all of this is really positive and this..." (pointing at the poster)

Everyone: "*food*"

Ana: "It was important that you suggested that I have lunch with you almost every day. And I think that that was something significant for me as well because in those moments I learned so much about other things that I don't see in the class. Through informal conversations I learned so much. Thank you! "

Everyone: "Thank you! "

*What has been significant for me from this experience is what has happened as a result of immersing myself in listening to and learning from my students inside and*

*outside of the classroom. I really appreciated their opening up to me to share their questions, fears, and dreams. We built a relationship of trust and frequently discussed how to learn best comfortably. I showed them that I was learning from them and they rapidly realised that they could also learn from each other. Little by little they became articulate about their needs, likes, concerns and aspirations.*

### **What I've learned from this as a practitioner**

Involving my students in sharing what was significant for them in what we did during an EAP pre-pre-session course via arts-enriched methods (HEA, 2014) has been empowering for the students in giving them a voice, in making us work towards a common goal, and in uniting us in a common enterprise; it is a statement of the value we have given to this educational practice. Given the need for more examples of good practice in EAP (Chun, 2015) and ELT in general, this is an attempt to address this issue by involving students in expressing what they value from their learning experience. Arts-enriched methods, in this case, drawings, have been used as tools for participants to express their thoughts, understandings, and feelings, which might be 'hard-to-put-into-words' (Weber, 2008), in order to 'go beyond a verbal mode of thinking' (Bagnoli, 2009: 565), and to open up spaces for creativity, imagination, criticality, as well as for that which is in our subconscious.

After the students had created their artworks, they were encouraged to talk about them. It can be argued that eliciting a verbal explanation of the drawing could reduce all the meaning already condensed in the image (Sontag, 2003). However, I would argue that the visual images participants created can help them develop their capacity to express themselves verbally, which is relevant in this particular course because it is on language learning. Their own verbal articulations also constitute further valuable data for being their own concrete interpretations. Involving students in transcribing what they had said about their drawings was meant to offer further opportunities to expand on their verbalisations.

The power of images lies in their ever-lasting potential to evoke memories and for meaning-making. This is particularly relevant for participants in this experience. As a participant myself in the experience, these drawings very often tell me more than what has been verbally articulated. But the same could be argued of any given data or formalisation of thought, which is by nature partial and incomplete (Langan, 1966). Again, what makes arts-informed methods so powerful is their direct accessibility and their being a source of meaning making, creativity, criticality, resonance and imagination not only for participants but also for the general viewer.

I have learned that working together is empowering, motivating and rewarding, and that a jointly-constructed product is powerful in that it unites us in a common enterprise forever.

### **What has been innovative about the writing here? Use of drawings and involvement of students**

What has made the writing here innovative is the use of drawings and the involvement of students in co-writing a journal article. These innovations are

justified, as the use of drawings shows art to be an alternative and effective tool to develop criticality, while the students' involvement in writing has acknowledged them as key actors in the educational enterprise.

What is innovative about this project is having involved my students in generating and using their own visual data after the course for their own development as learners and human beings. For this purpose and to share our educational experience and further development, the students themselves used the images they produced and in some case the video-recorded talk about the drawings as the basis to produce further understanding. I am proud of having involved my students in the cyclical research process of reflecting on their EAP learning experience by means of creating visual art, talking about it all together in order to make sense of it and to generate further mutual understanding, transcribing the talk (in some cases) and explaining it further in writing, receiving feedback about grammar from me, the lecturer-researcher, and sharing a jointly-written product among us which surely could be used to generate further development. Besides, this product we have jointly generated will be useful in helping us to understand what we have done more deeply. Usually, classroom time constraints mean that it is difficult for us to explain the reasons behind what we do in detail. Thus, sharing our own story in this way allows us to explain it more accurately; since we are co-authors of this paper, reading it will hopefully be in everyone's interest.

This experience can inspire other educators and learners to work together for mutual development, expanding opportunities for knowledge production to key actors, the learners, in the educational process, and promoting participants' criticality development. Using artful research tools (Back and Puwar, 2012) can facilitate this process.

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