Emotional Laboratory: Drawing and Creative Experience as a Collective Visual Narrative

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Abstract. This communication focuses on answering three questions: What do we mean by emotional, creative expression? How to learn to research from visual storytelling? How to do it collectively? We respond to these issues through the analysis of the pedagogical experience entitled *Emotional Laboratory*. We have asked architecture apprentices to turn an investigation into a visual narration. They have made it in teams and use drawings and other free experiences as creative tools.

Students need to understand reality as a human construction that they work. Apprentices discover and communicate the meanings of that reality, and both, in turn, interact through their mutual understanding.

They discover the collective intelligence in this reciprocal work and their co-workers. As they must reveal their graphic group research, presenting the process repeats every week, they develop their public oratory and increase their critical capacity.

Emotional Laboratory brings every apprentice develops and shares the ideas around a topic visually raised in the course so that they are validated, rejected, or combined by the rest of the group. In addition to the visual experience, the apprentice begins in collaborative work. This cooperative learning takes place among people coming from different contexts, so the members of every team feedback and generate a coherent and shared visual narration.

Keywords: Emotional Laboratory · Collective intelligence · Narrative creation

1 Introduction. Emotional Lab

“[The experiment] wants to become the expression of creativity with a free will that, without trying to deny rational values, can aspire to be fruitful under an emotional conception (Goeritz 1953).”

This communication focuses on answering three questions: What do we mean by emotional, creative expression? How to learn to investigate from the visual narrative? How to do it collectively?

We respond to these issues through the analysis of our recent teaching experience entitled *Emotional Laboratory*, and that consists of raising in the classroom research that the apprentice architects must turn into a visual project, by groups, drawing and other creative experiences.

1.1 A Laboratory in the Atelier

The *Emotional Laboratory* is a teaching experience based, in its theoretical approach, on an educational research methodology called “critical communicative research” The research becomes a ploy for the apprentice to participate in an absolute studied reality around a raised topic of which there is a group-based subjectivity and communicate it visually.

This form of research tries to understand reality to interpret it, but also to explain it since its ultimate purpose is to transform it. “Critical communicative research has taken its first steps for more than a decade, and its applications in the social sphere result in success (Bizquerra 2004)”.

The following reflexions must be considered in the field in question, that of architecture:

Why Propose Group Creative Processes in Architecture Ateliers? In learning in Architectural Schools, it is common to consider that creativity originates in individual processes. Spaces of creative diversity, however, favour the development of collective intelligence. By reversing the reflection, we can affirm that without collective processes, the creative experience is impoverished, and therefore the group creative processes are more enriching, although sophisticated.

The experience analysed in these lines is born from a group process since the beginning. First, we propose a topic to research in the class, and then the working groups reflect on the reality bounded from the action and try to explain it make-do artefacts and drawings that seek, in turn, new approximations. That is, they speculate from team practice.

The examples of the processes set out in this communication are from the course 2018-19, *A World of Migrants: The Power of Movement*. One of the groups focuses its gaze on the lost paradises and stops at the relevance of plastic on the migratory routes of individual animals altered by the barriers that generate this material in the landscape. The words disappear from the narrative when the members of the group manipulate a plastic object to turn it into an artefact that triggers, in turn, a composite drawing that maps the presence of plastics on the limited routes (Fig. 1).

The eye directs the hand because collective action precedes the word; the group does not speak; the word comes later. Action generates more action than reflexions.

Drawing and Creative Experience. For Jerome Bruner, knowledge and human creation are divided into two modes, the paradigm and the narrative. The latter is more focused on the humans being, on their experiences, desires, and needs. An example of this form of approximation is the series on the daily routines of architect Clorindo Testa from Buenos Aires (1923-2013) and is a primary reference for several groups in our classroom (Fig. 2).

In the specific example, we discussed in the previous section, the lost climatic havens, and plastics, the narrative creation lies. The group’s experience shows that plastic barriers are holding back ancestral migrations of animals and that human interventions in the landscape must favour or at least not disadvantage them.

Fig. 1. Artefact and drawing, group 8. The work *Barriers* is a cartography of landscapes transformed by humans by artificial barriers of various kinds and plastic materiality. Source: Authors

Fig. 2. Clorindo Testa, *Inhabit, Move around, Work, Entertain*, 1952-1974. Source: Glusberg 1983

We conceive of this mode of viewing as an experimental inquiry that turns our atelier into a laboratory. Architectural creative processes, understood as a way of collective visual declaration of reality, trigger a narrative-critical process.

Fifty-seven apprentices are integrated into the atelier-laboratory and are organized into fourteen groups of three or four members to carry out the experience described in this communication. The first group presentation of the research in the process takes place in the classroom on March 5, 2019, followed by other collective presentations on April 12 and 26, 10, and 17 of May.

The training of the architect requires the communication skills we acquire through practice. In the proposed exercise, the apprentices share these skills with the rest of the School in a public event.

The Open Day of the School holds on 24 May, and the last presentation of the experience is delayed to this date and becomes a public event open to all those attending

the Open Day. The fourteen members participate and present their research at a time of ten minutes per team. We invite four artists/architects, and they dialogue with all the teams and spectators.

1.2 A Case Study *Emotional Laboratory*

“The detonator is to get them to talk, to vote ideas, without judgment, without restriction or anything, because that is where I think the big things come up—throw the idea you want, Say what you like and go! (...) At a first moment, that would be for the detonator, to make them talk, to present ideas, to make anything they come up with sound like what it sounds like (Valbuena 2018)”.

The issue raised in the classroom *A World of Migrants: The Power of Movement* is connecting the first-year apprentices with their daily lives. First, they express their reflections in the initial drawings, without judging; then there are other ideas that they also express in drawings and other formats.

As with the day-to-day life by Clorindo Testa, some groups to feel part of a migrant world, empathize with other migrants (Fig. 3), or to be so themselves by becoming urban migrants wandering in their daily lives through the spaces that make up their routine (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3. Drawing and photography of light in motion, group 3. The work *The Forgotten* fits a group of migrants from their place of origin to their destination, reconstructing the atmosphere of the spaces travelled. Source: Authors

Concern for climate change, loneliness, tourism-phobia, or gentrification are the orientations of group work. These approaches derive from the artefacts, maps, videos, installations, and performances that occur in the atelier. The members of each group narrate at one time and graphically, their conclusions about the relationships and simultaneities existing between the reflected reality, space, and emotions.

The work of the groups visualizes subjectivities. These subjectivities result from an egalitarian dialogue of all individualities. They not only speak but communicate visually. The instrumental dimension lies in the graphic and experimental process, and the group gives meaning to research that does not deny rational values and bears fruit under an emotional conception.

Fig. 4. Manipulated photography, Group 1. The work *Converged Trips* follows the same routine of two persons who, without knowing each other, use the subway of the city in which the course takes place daily. It delves into the invisible networks that they create in these daily lives and the public spaces in which they develop. Source: Authors

The recent internal surveys that we conducted in our groups verify that the apprentices have experienced and highly value the collective intelligence that appears in this form of exercise, much more abundant in its way than a sum of individualities. It is the apprentices themselves who discover this idea of collective intelligence in their collective work.

2 Shared Drawings and Creative Experiences

“Collective problem solving is not a significant part of our education. Virtually all evaluations and reviews are about individual performance. And, in the few exceptions in which group problem solving is involved, it is a homogeneous group of colleagues, all from the same country, who make up the whole team (Buxton 2007).”

This teaching experience aspires to exercise collective intelligence in the classroom, from a humanistic approach close to the theories of Wilhelm Dilthey and tries to make it visible to the apprentices and members of the groups. This collective intelligence is called cultural intelligence by some authors (Bizquerra 2004).

The apprentice needs to understand the reality in which he works as a human construct whose meanings he communicatively constructs through interaction in mutual

understanding. In this reciprocal work, he discovers in his companions the collective intelligence and by presenting it repeatedly to them he develops his public oratory and increases his critical capacity.

2.1 An Iterative Shared Process

The teaching experience analysed here approximates the rational to the intuitive: it is an open process. Although this statement may seem recurrent, what is important about the *Emotional Laboratory* is the creative process it triggers, a process that is iterative and shared.

Repeated Critical Ability or Self-criticism. The experience takes place in nine weeks with two weekly sessions (Thursday and Friday) of three hours each. In the first sessions, the maestros present an auxiliary tool that is a rubric in which logic and subjectivity converge. According to this rubric, maestros lead the first constructive criticisms. From the second session of presentations, the trainees lead the discussions after the presentations accompanied by the maestros.

The maestros elaborate the rubric according to specific indicators of Kasei engineering applied to sociology and served the apprentices to elaborate their analysis of the evaluable discourse later.

Kansei Engineering is a method to translate feelings and impressions into product parameters since the 1970s. Professor Mitsuo Nagamachi designed them. The syllable “Kan” in Japanese, means sense and the syllable “sei” sensitivity, “Kansei” means something like “the sensibility perceived through the senses.”

This rubric tool has the pedagogical value of being a reference for the apprentice to be critical of their work, critical of their work in the group, and critical of the work of others. They do critique through action. That is, the apprentices criticize their work with more work; hence the process is iterative.

Shared Shares and Their Instrumental Dimension. The apprentice elaborates and shares his ideas around the issue raised so that they are validated, rejected or supplemented by the rest of the team: a collaborative work is initiated between people coming from different contexts that feedback, draw and experience in a shared way.

The sequence of sessions in the classroom simultaneously: they work individually, a session on Thursdays, and they work on the group, the session on Fridays. They work outside the atelier, too (Fig. 5) (Sclater 2003). The students prepare the exhibitions that they share weekly with the rest of the groups. In the last session of the course, they share their final and group presentation to an external audience in a public presentation of a playful character that performs in open (Fig. 6).

2.2 We Base the Approach to Our Area of Knowledge from the Art World

The creative experience shapes the images that arise in the eye of our mind, our dreams and our daily life (experiences, desires, needs). An *Emotional Laboratory* is a form of praxis, through which the knowledge of we can mature in wisdom by the empathy that is born later with group work. This teaching experience offers a fresh air path for all

Fig. 5. Presentation, group 9. The work 2173. *Lost climate paradises* that explore, map and establish connections between certain common spaces for the members of the group in the present and their idea of how these spaces will be in the year 2173. Source: Authors

Fig. 6. Poster *Urban Infidelities*, group 11. The open day is announced using posters prepared by the groups distributed by the School in which this experience is developed and disseminated on social networks. Source: Authors

members of each group to explore artistic creation from this spirit of self-discovery and discovery in the group.

In the triggers raised (references of the art-world), the students discover their personal history, recognizes processes, patterns, and themes in life, identify and liberates memories, combines the diary and the creation of new images, practice the ability of active imagination and connects it with others.

Interwoven with all this is the author's creative process and his journey to connect his emotions through creation (Allen 1995).

The graphic heritage of the Italian-Argentine architect Clorindo Testa (Glusberg 1983) features an immense mosaic developed over twenty years (1952-1974) and composed of 107 drawings (70 × 70 cm) in which he imagined the daily routine of a boy who lived in the Buenos Aires town of Avellaneda to show that, over time, in contemporary cities, some problems were aggravated rather than eradicated.

With this reference and this way of connecting graphic processes and architectonic production, apprentices produce their images (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Mapping the flooding process of the Kiribati Islands, Group 13. The work *Exitum* explores the idea that people without tradition is a people without any origin, it generates an atlas of geographies that will be transformed with the increase of the sea level and the anthropological consequences that the migrations of the inhabitants of those geographies will trigger. Source: Authors

This approach, which initially starts from triggers of the art world, as we have already stated, helps students to approach the issue posed by provoking, that will accept, reject or end up in discussion groups through other drawings and other creative experiences that are a critical form of graphic communication. The trainees investigate the proposed reality and together investigate themselves, narrating to themselves, relying on images.

Our goal is to enhance the emotional and to do so collectively, in mixed groups. We propose a flexible work scheme in its technique that, with the interaction of the members of the teams, triggers the search and the appearance or chance encounter with new techniques, which also makes the experience instrumental research. This process has only one condition: to think with the generated images. This process of thinking with the generated images is, in fact, iterative.

“I have always said that paintings generate ideas, and not that ideas generate images; that is, I try to get the works to generate thought. [...] It is necessary to think before and after but not during the moment of creation because sometimes thought paralyzes (Barceló 2011).”

The drawings, the artefacts, the installations, and the performances show us atmospheres that directly enliven our senses through landscapes that sometimes vanish. They are radio-graphed in other cases, they investigate the deepest structures of their architecture, revealing them sometimes, other times they become defined and floating fields of colour that interact (Fig. 8) but, above all, generate thought. They made everything with colour and graphics, with texts and images superimposed. The universe liberated by these drawings and other creative experiences is suggestive and very tempting.

Fig. 8. Models and drawings, groups 9, 10 and 14. Source: Authors

The *Emotional Lab* comprehension is not the same now. It is a footprint that shares the past and present of the groups and alerts them to individualities, collections, and processes loaded with emotions.

3 Collective Graphic Narratives. Conclusions

“Now some might argue that the same purpose could be achieved simply by having a project website, where images could be shared among the community. Although cheaper and well understood, a grounded approach to the conventional network is far inferior, as it does not have the property of visible persistence or provide the same sense of background consciousness. With it, one must take explicit action to look at the work. It does not come for free completely by being in the studio (Buxton 2007).”

Fig. 9. The process of the *Emotional Laboratory*. Source: Authors of this article

The presence on the web, in our case, is not enough. The presence of work, pedagogically, is what generates thought in-depth, thought, and narration. This narrative has enthusiasm apprentices that are part of a group. They tell their approach to the topic proposed through their own experiences and needs. Empathy is born by sharing successive presentations.

“Things have their life (...) further than the ingenuity of nature, and even beyond the miracle and magic (García-Márquez 2007).”

The topic for the research proposed in the atelier *A World of Migrants: The Power of Movement* is the detonator of works entitled: *2173, Lost Climate Paradises, Barriers, Tourism and the Ephemeral Beauty, Creatio apud devastate, Exitum*. Testa’s work was the criticism of the Italian-Argentinean architect towards the modern city through the routines drawn on a real scale in a suffocating urban environment. Apprentices are critical of the proposed topic by communicating how they are searching for new urban, climatic, and work. The atelier becomes a space of shared ideas born of a living collective intelligence that learners experience and value positively.

The visual project shown has that pedagogical value plus that results from the immediate comparison with the graphic research heritage of Clorindo Testa, which is one of the references shown by the maestros, as we have already mentioned.

The final work combines the imposing scale of the panoramic views and the intimate portrait of the life of apprentices. Both are a criticism of the subject of the exercise. Both scales coexist with the overlap of techniques and highlight the group character of the work. The experience becomes a form of a collective visual narration that is the result of a process of drawings and other creative experiences (Fig. 9).

The reader can now deduce the answers to the three initial questions. What is meant by emotional, creative expression? How to learn to investigate from the graphic narrative? How to do it collectively? Our answer is open, the topic proposed in the classroom is the play: the apprentices themselves are the researches. Finally, they draw narrations of what their intersubjective objectivity is, we mean, the atelier becomes a space of shared ideas. Experience is the result of collective intelligence that apprentices experience and value. A new area of work arises in which drawing and creative experience are a form of collective graphic co-communication: *An Emotional Laboratory*.

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