



Calendar Connections

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Can collaborative creativity help to connect digital practitioners with each other and enhance their well-being? In order to answer this we undertook a piece of qualitative research. Using bricolage as our methodology, we surveyed participants of a collaborative creative project and used grounded theory in order to categorise the responses. In order to illustrate our findings and better explain the nature of the creative project, we share some of the artwork and music that was created by participants as part of this project. We conclude that as well as enhancing well-being, this creative endeavour also added to the personal learning of these participants.

Keywords: Bricolage, Bricoleur, Collaboration, Curation, Reflective practices, Phenomenology

Introduction

As digital educators we realise the importance of creative collaborations for well-being, and have written about this before (Honeychurch and Taleo, 2020, 2021). As seasoned practitioners in open, online spaces we often design and participate in collaborative projects which use technology to create and share digital media, and characterise these practices as being bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Papert, 1993). Bricolage, as we understand it, is as much an attitude as a practice - it is an approach to meaning that applies not only to our creative practices but also to our research and scholarship. In this paper we describe how we used bricolage as a research method to understand bricolage as a practice and the bricoleur as practitioner. We look at how curation acts as a form of relational agency to make visible our thinking together (Beetham et al, 2022).

Background information

In the November of 2020 members of a collaborative, creative community called Connected Learning Massive Open Online Collaboration (CLMOOC) produced a calendar with the title 'Collective Hope'. CLMOOC is a group of educators from across the world with a shared interest in connected learning and collaborative practices. The decision to design this calendar was made during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. We needed to find a project that would help the community channel emotions during that time. It needed to be creative, not too serious (but also not too frivolous) and to allow a variety of ways to respond. A group of five of us put out a call over social media using the CLMOOC hashtag asking people to submit an image that they had created or taken on the theme of hope. One of the authors took on the task of curation. The final version was uploaded to our community blog (Hodgson, 2020).

The community chose to create a second calendar in December of 2021 (Hodgson, 2021). This time no explicit theme was chosen, though some of us might have assumed/seen/made a connection with the first theme. The same participants as 2021 calendar were invited first and the response was high enough to progress with the project.

Both 2020 and 2021 calendars follow a similar design that is provided in pdf format for self-printing. This was a primary design decision by the curator and community. Producing a physical artefact was something that we all felt was important as a balance to all the digital work we do. In addition to a single page for each month, attention was given to the front and back page and inside covers. Each contributor is acknowledged in the work. Creative Commons licensing was chosen to further encourage openness and reuse of the works.

Methodology

Bricolage was the overall approach for this project. Bricolage, as we understand it, is the practice of drawing from a variety of theoretical approaches while retaining methodological rigor (Kincheloe, 2005; Semetsky, 2011). We were interested in how people chose their images/artefacts and why and in the global nature and seasonal variances of the locations of the people that chose to provide work for the calendars. We wanted to try to influence their answers as little as possible and see what types of response emerged (while acknowledging that researchers are never really 'outside' the research design), so we opted for a phenomenological approach. In phenomenology, the researcher (s) aim to describe phenomena themselves as accurately as possible, while refraining from any pre-given framework (Groenewald, 2004, p.44).

Data Collection

In following the phenomenological approach we chose to find out how and why contributors had chosen their submissions through the method of a semi-structured survey with a set of prompts designed to encourage respondents to recall the situation that they were in when they created their submissions. Because all of the participants of this project live in different locations, data collection was completed online. The AoIR Ethical Guidelines (AoIR, 2019) were followed in this collaboration. From the basis of the CLMOOC community, which has a shared understanding of trust and a clear creative commons approach to work produced, we used a Google Form for each of the participants of the calendar projects to obtain approval to use artwork and words. The authors were explicit that data collected from the survey would be used for an academic paper. All questions were optional and responses encouraged through free text field. A Google Form was directly emailed to each of the participants of the calendar projects with a number of questions and permission was sought to use artwork from the calendar and words provided in the survey for the purposes of a paper such as this. Out of the 17 participants over the two years of the project we had 11 respondents to our survey. All questions were optional and responses encouraged in free text fields. There was also a space for respondents to contribute 'other thoughts'. A summary of the questions follows:

- Question 1: The 2021 Calendar had a theme of Hope. With the first image in front of you/your mind, ask yourself: Why this image? Did the image relate directly to the theme? What were you thinking at the time? What does it mean to you (now)?
- Question 2: The 2022 Calendar had no direct theme but perhaps a reflection on where things were with you. With the second image in front of you/your mind, ask yourself: Why this image? What were you thinking at the time? What does it mean to you (now)?
- Question 3: Thinking about both calendars: Did you consciously make a connection between both images or works for the calendar? What connections can you see now?
- Question 4: What does the calendar mean to you?
- Question 5: Other thoughts

Data Analysis

Because this was a small data set, all responses were coded together. First each respondent was assigned a number and answers to each question were copied. A grounded theory approach was then used in order to look at the repeated words and concepts for each question. Once all of the responses had been marked up, another copy of all responses was made in order to code them according to the themes that were emerging, refining and recoding as appropriate. Because the responses were free text with no word limit, many of these were not limited to one subject, and so were coded with more than one theme. Once all responses had been coded, the themes were grouped into categories of cognate themes. The point of this last exercise was not to resolve all themes into a discrete set of high-level categories, but to get a sense of the types of responses given and their various nuances.

Results

The resulting categories were negative and positive emotions, connections, joy and metacognition. We will briefly demonstrate the results with direct quotes from the participants.

Negative emotions

It is not surprising that, as these two calendars were created during the pandemic and lockdown, a large number of responses spoke about the fear and uncertainty that they had felt at the time, and of the desire for this to be overcome. For example, one respondent wrote that: ‘As I look back now I remember the fear that we felt, and am thankful that we were kept safe from the worst of the pandemic’ (7,1).

Other respondents wrote that the images they had selected represented balance and the rhythms of nature persisting throughout an uncertain world and helping them to forget their fear: ‘To me, their [birds] presence, and their song are a reminder that when "normal" is disrupted, there are nonetheless certain rhythms that remain constant. The image and thought process I followed is just as relevant now’ (5,1).

Positive emotions

Within the responses there were also many references to positive emotions such as happiness and joy as well as peace and hope (again, this latter is not surprising as it was the theme of the first calendar). For example, one response talks about the positive emotions that their chosen image evoked: ‘I knew that hope is about opportunity, about trusting the process. Go for a walk and the world might just give you a gift’ (3,1). While another also reflected upon how the images they had submitted represented their attitude to life: ‘If we keep an open heart, open mind, and open our eyes and ears, we can see the beauty, joy, and blessings that surrounds us...’ (11, 4).

A third respondent spoke about hope throughout their responses, summarising their thoughts with this comment: ‘The calendar itself is representative of the message — we are all in this together, and what I said before— that CLMOOC people epitomize the serendipitous, the spontaneous, and the planned “giving” to the world, a hope I feel for the world’ (9,5).

Connections

Another theme that arose in the responses was that of connections - of connections between the different images (both their own and those of others), and of the connections that respondents felt to others in the group, with some responses linking these two themes together. For example, one respondent wrote that the calendar represented their connections to the project: ‘The calendar means a connection with the CLMOOC members. I always enjoy the direct connection I have with the people that participate. Throughout the year it is a reminder of these connections’ (10,4). Another wrote that the calendar represented the ethos of the community itself: ‘I think that sort of visual consistency [the cover image] says a lot about the CLMOOC community that continues to connect in various ways, always looking for opportunities’ (8,3).

The Joy of Collaboration

One set of responses are particularly noteworthy in their similarity. Question 4 asked what the calendar meant to participants, and almost all responses spoke about the pleasure that these collaborations gave them. For example one respondent said succinctly that it was the: ‘joy of creating together’ (2,4,). Another noted their appreciation for the generosity of this group: ‘I always appreciate the generosity and openness that the participants have in being included in this project as well as being willing to reflect here in this exercise’ (10, 5). The generosity is reflected in making the final project freely available for download, printing and sharing.

Metacognition

The final category of responses might be categorised as being metacognition and reflection. Some participants talked about how the images they had chosen represented learning from experience, for example: ‘This image is about learning from our experiences in order to move forward in meaningful ways’ (4,2). While another respondent wrote that the act of creating was itself illuminating: ‘what for me is powerful is what you can’t see, you’re following a path where the destination is unclear but you are living a moment of illumination’ (1,1). We approach this moving-towards meaning and the act of self-awareness in creating in the discussion section.

Discussion

Bricolage is the attitude and the method of collecting contributions and curating them in the calendar form. The aim of the bricoleur is to bring apparent disparate items together to make a pleasing display for a purpose. This purpose is not only to track calendar dates but to bring together a community through remembering the contributors as we view their evocative digital creations over time. “One of the major purposes of phenomenological description is to build toward meaning” Fraleigh (1991). With the survey results we were able to add meaning to the description as written in the Background Information section above. As this participant noted there was a timelessness about the contributions, ‘...today— it means the same— the vision of what is possible as sudden and new and hopeful in the world’ (9,5).

The contributions came from many different parts of the world and over different seasons. The work of the curator was to respect the requests of the contributor, for example if a particular month was requested and then to sensitively place the works alongside of the music for each month. The works invite a closer inspection and to pause and consider the image or listen to the music. ‘Often people don’t look beyond the obvious’ (1) wrote this contributor in relation to the charcoal drawing provided (Figure 1). Observation and attention to detail is shown in the artist’s hand as charcoal maps the eye of the dog. This close up view shows details that might be missed to the distant observer. The image in Figure 2 shows Sarah’s contribution, a striking photo of a sheep on the Isle of Mull in Scotland. She said ‘I chose this image of the sheep as I loved its pugnacious attitude.’ All the twelve images are accompanied by a QR code (Figure 3) that can be scanned to play music composed by another contributor. The monthly tags were hand written by the curator, scanned and added to each month. Figure 4 shows another technique of digital art in this striking piece which is a commentary on video invigilation in education settings. It aligns with the concepts of eyes, seeing, observation, attention and focus. Part of the challenge of the curation work was to match contributions from different continents and provide a cohesive work that could be enjoyed throughout the following year from any hemisphere.



Figure 1: May Month, Image: Simon Ensor, Music: Kevin Hodgson, 2021.



Figure 2: August Month, Image: Sarah Honeychurch, 2021

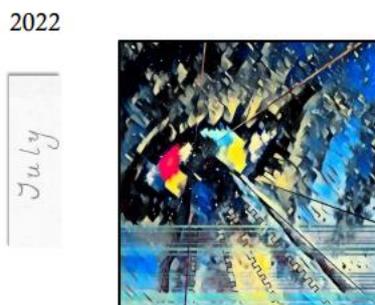


Figure 3: July Month, Image: Matt Offord, 2021.



Figure 4: Music for month of July: ‘Gathering at dusk’, Kevin Hodgson, 2021.

A recurring theme in the CLMOOC community is one of noticing and observation. Throughout all the images provided we can see a thoughtfulness and awareness of the community. From the images and poetry contributed to both calendars, the handwritten month labels and the music that is provided for the second calendar as shown in the images provided, we can see the care and intention that is taken in this project.

Conclusion and future considerations

What we have learnt is that this project has allowed our community to express emotions, have joy in connection, provide an artefact that continues to connect us throughout the year and encourage attention and care of one another. As well as bringing joy to all of the participants of this project, this creative collaboration helped participants to learn from their experiences and to make sense to them. If there are future iterations of this project it would be good to find out changes in perceptions of participants. This was an informal collaboration between a group of educators, and the positive impact on our well-being leads us to appreciate the important of such projects. When designing distance learning courses in the future, space should be made for such creative projects.

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