

Creative & Credible

RESEARCHING AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN ARTS AND HEALTH: THE VISUAL MATRIX.

Written by Lyn Froggett with the Creative and Credible Project Team.

What is the Visual Matrix?

The Visual Matrix (VM) is a new group-based visual methodology developed by researchers at the University of Central Lancashire in 2015. Its development was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the Cultural Value Programme (Froggett et al 2014). The Visual Matrix grew out of a groupwork practice known as Social Dreaming. Its theoretical underpinnings are discussed by Froggett et al (2015)

The visual matrix elicits aesthetic, social and emotional responses to a work, process, event or intervention to understand better the transformative potential art in social contexts. The methodology prompts personal associations in a shared setting. The first part – the visual matrix itself - is led by imagery, visualisation and affect and commences with a stimulus that directs participants' attention to the object of inquiry and asks them what comes to mind. The group is then facilitated in a process of associative thinking. Associations accumulate over the course of about an hour as participants respond both to original stimulus and to one another. They then begin the process of analysis which is later made available to an interpretation panel who relate meaning to context and move towards findings.

The VM can elicit responses from those directly experiencing an artwork, such as exhibition audiences. In research settings it uses prompts such as photographs or video or performance

Why use the Visual Matrix?

The Visual Matrix works differently to a traditional focus group, avoiding opinion and the judgement and generating richer responses that reveal a full range of sensory, emotional and intellectual experience. It is particularly useful for enabling people to express experiences they find difficult to put into words. The dominance of powerful voices or expert discourse is generally avoided. Under carefully calibrated conditions, and with an experienced facilitator, the method is suitable for use in highly sensitive situations. It has been employed with people recovering from substance misuse (Manley et al 2015) and among professionals working with extremely vulnerable young men (Roy et al 2015). Its value for arts and health also derives

party from its ability to enable an emergent conversation in a trans-disciplinary context, where no settled discourse yet exists. For example. It is being used to evaluate a collaboration between an artist and an endocrinologist <https://www.artsadmin.co.uk/projects/mark-storor>, and another between an artist and cognitive neuroscientists (Muller et al 2015)

Conduct of a Visual Matrix

The visual matrix demands careful facilitation and a number of conditions and steps.

Who?

It can be used with between six and 35 participants and requires approximately one facilitator for every ten people. Participants can share similar demographic or socio-cultural characteristics, or be mixed groups of the general public, or expert groups with a specialist interest. No previous knowledge or experience of the method is required from participants.

When?

It can be used in a research context, as part of a formative evaluation, or at the end of a project for a rich assessment of impact that takes into account socio-cultural dimensions of group experience. Although grounded in subjective responses of participants, these accumulate into a shared process, and it is not therefore suitable for case studies of individuals. It can be used retrospectively to understand the impact of past events where sustained change processes have been set in motion

Where?

Participants assemble in a space where they can work without interruption. They, along with the facilitator(s), are seated in a snowflake pattern to avoid direct eye contact making it easier to speak into the space rather than directly to one another. After the matrix, the chairs are re-arranged into a semi-circle and the group moves into discussion mode to map key clusters of emergent imagery and ideas and intensities of affect.

What?

The group is presented with stimulus material linked with the evaluation or research question. This can be photographs, visual artworks or other objects. Dance, music, film, performance and fragments of poetry could also be used. The stimulus could even be an entire exhibition or images from a durational project that unfolds over time.

How?

Participants are invited to respond emotionally, aesthetically and cognitively to prompts. The facilitator encourages them to offer any images, thoughts and feelings that come to mind, as they wish and without turn-taking, pointing out that they may be prompted either by the original stimulus or by the contributions of any member of the group. The facilitator takes a non-directive role, participating along with others and modelling the associative process in order to prevent the group veering into analysis or discussion until the matrix is over. Together they generate overlaid 'collage-like' clusters of imagery, affects and ideas.

In the post-matrix discussion the participants reflect on what has emerged in the matrix, with the facilitator noting emergent ideas on a board or flip-chart. This process of image-mapping is recorded for later interpretation by researchers. The interpretation protocol used moves from the 'experience near' proceedings of the matrix, asking what has emerged, and how and why things were said, until a fully contextualised analysis is obtained. The aim is usually to produce findings which are policy or practice relevant.

Visual Matrix: references, resources and further reading.

A brief demonstration video of a visual matrix, filmed in relation to a photo exhibition by William Titley is available at <http://youtu.be/ttHHty0f7Pg>.

The report of the project in which the matrix was tested, developed and compared with a focus group:
Froggett, Lynn; Manley, Julian; Roy, Alastair; Prior, Michael & Claire, Doherty (2014) Public Art and Local Civic Engagement. Arts and Humanities Research Council, and University of Central Lancashire

http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/10961/1/AHRC_CV20RDA_TOC_FINAL_2.pdf
[Accessed January 3, 2015]

The methodology article in which the underpinning theory is discussed is Froggett, L., Manley, J. and Roy, A. (in press 2015) The Visual Matrix Method: Imagery and Affect in a Group-based research setting, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs>

For a discussion of the VM in research with people recovering from substance misuse see:

Manley, J., Roy, A. & Froggett, L. (2015, in press) Researching recovery from substance misuse using visual methods. In Hardwick, L.; Smith, R. & Worsley, A., (eds.) Innovation in Social Work Research, London: Jessica Kingsley

For a discussion of the VM in research with vulnerable young men see:

Roy, A., Hughes, J., Froggett, L. and Christensen, J. (2015 in press) Using Mobile Methods to Explore the Lives of Marginalised Young Men in Manchester, in eds, L. Hardwick, R Smith and A. Worsley Innovation in Social Work Research, London: Jessica Kingsley

For a discussion of the visual matrix in a trans-disciplinary art-science context see Muller, Lizzie, Bennett, Jill, Froggett, Lynn and Bartlett, Vanessa (in press 2015). Understanding Third Space: Evaluating art-science collaboration in Proceedings of 21st International Symposium of Electronic Art, August 14th-18th 2015, Vancouver, Canada.