Educational researchers have come to recognise the value of participatory research. Ethically, participants have a right to be included, but also as a means of enhancing validity through including a range of people in research. The type of visual methods we are advocating, centred on visually mediated encounters, epitomise this integration of inclusivity and validity.

As many researchers have reported, the use of visual images and activities tends to relax participants and encourage the involvement of those who find reading and writing uninviting or who would prefer not to talk to a researcher about sensitive issues. Using mediating visual items gives researcher and participant something to create, look at or discuss together, ‘bridging gaps between the worlds of the researcher and the researched’ (Harper, 2002: 20), which potentially enables participants to drive the encounter. Yet, as researchers using these methods are also keen to point out, there are risks in relying too heavily on the researcher’s interpretation of isolated visual products, such as photographs or drawings. It is necessary to question how we understand and analyse the results of these encounters, remembering that they are products of the context and the task demands (Croghan et al., 2008), with meaning for us as well as for our participants (Piper & Frankham, 2007). Fundamentally, valid and useful social research is about making connections: between people and between ideas. Visual and spatial activities - drawing diagrams and pictures, sorting images, creating new arrangements - can provide a focus for such interaction between research participants and researchers, supporting the establishment of connections and the building of understanding. The misconceptions that can arise from seeing visual products in isolation makes sense when we understand that the research process needs to facilitate a co-construction of new knowledge and shared understandings through making connections, the visual products or activities ‘are not end products, they are markers in a conversation’ (Clark, 2010).


