Multimodal reflections on the ‘Making Connections’ workshop
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On 6th November 2017 the Connectors Study team organised the Making Connections workshop, a day-long training event for doctoral, early career and freelance researchers lead by Melissa Nolas and Christos Varvantakis. A group of 30 came together at Candid Arts Trust in Islington, London to think through and experiment with the Connectors Study multimodal data as well as participants’ own data. Elsie Whittington, a final year doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex, has contributed a multimodal reflective piece on her experience of the day, together with audio contributions from another colleague and former contributor to the Connectors Study blog, Dr Rebecca Webb.

I had the privilege to join a small group workshop on using multimodal ethnographic methods for research. This day was designed to bring together and nurture a community of practice and encourage us to be more public about private acts and experiences of research practice. We went on a journey, if you’ll excuse the metaphor, following ‘lines of desire’ and considering the multimodal and sensual dimensions of ethnographic research. I’m sure I could write for hours about what I got from this workshop and how it’s going to help me (finally) write my methods chapter. Rather than simply share my learning by deciphering my scribbled notes and presenting them as a block of well written and edited text I’ve decide to go messy(ish) multimodal.
I was particularly taken by some of the conversations that I encountered during the day that spoke about affect and ways of capturing and talking about senses such as smell, sound and touch. Given that, and the generosity of the Connectors Study team sharing their raw and more cooked data, I have opted to send some reflections in the style of a sensory ethnographic note, with complementary multimodal ‘data’ and reflections that my wonderful colleague Rebecca Webb has also contributed to…

So:

**Monday 6th November. Making Connections workshop.**

30(ish) participants – all but two seemed to be women – but I may have miscounted or mis-gendered people. From the interactions that I had it seemed there was a good spread of people – many doctoral researchers but some early career researchers – connected to academic institutions as well as some freelancers and/or working with charities.

There was excitement in the room already when I arrived – we were surrounded by data, by artefacts and inspiration from the Connectors Study and that immediately encourage people to move around the room – it was ok to hover by yourself and look at an image – a much better way to avoid or initiate conversation if you don’t know anyone, than standing awkwardly by a registration desk or tea trolley!

**Touch:**

It felt like today was a chance to ‘touch’ base with colleagues and reconnect with a mode of thinking. We had the opportunity to touch on our data but also to be touched by the data and experiences of others.

After being greeted by Robyn and getting my bearing’s P and I saw Melissa, who was running the day. She came over and gave me hug! Some human contact to begin the day was much appreciated, particularly from an academic who I very much admire (not sure if I should keep this bit in when I send it!). I felt very welcomed into the space and at ease – if a little chilly - although that felt good after the early morning and train ride.
Life:
I’m not sure how this is a sense really – but I liked the 12 point picture above and felt that it would be more interesting to consider more than the usual five senses... I suppose in terms of life this workshop was something to cram into what feels like a very FULL life at the moment – but it was certainly worth it. But also this brings to mind the variable and volatile ‘life’ of a research project. The way in which research is brought to life – how a project is conceived (nurtured, dissected or shelved potentially as a result of funding and ethics) and then carried out. But also I suppose it makes me think about how a project, a method, and experience, is given life and meaning beyond the research team and participants. The Connectors Study brings to life the common experiences of children and what matters to them in the form of an exhibition.

It also became clear during the day that in capturing children’s everyday lives this wok had quite literally taken over the researchers’ lives for a period! The demanding realities of ethnographic research were recognised and I think that may people found this affirming. It’s tiring for us all!

Movement:
I mentioned above that the room was set up in a way that encouraged us to move around the room and quite literally walk around and alongside representations of the Connectors Study research process. Movement was also a metaphor used during the day. We spoke about how we can ‘move’ through our data taking ‘lines of desire’ between different modalities and different ways of thinking about and grouping data. We spoke about movement as part of ethnography and the tensions we can experience when deciding how to map, explore and capture a given space.

See HTML version for audio commentary

Equilibrium:
I suppose the environment and the other participants afforded a sense of equilibrium – for me at least. I felt there was a kind of willingness and openness that allowed for quite seamless transitions into working in groups, asking question and presenting research dilemmas. It felt to me that there was a generous, and therefore generative, nature to the way we all shared our research experiences and imaginaries. Although at times I wasn’t that generous choosing to work with a colleague I knew when it came to talking about our own data. We had a selfish moment – thinking that we might be more productive working with each other than with people we don’t know. I certainly found it a useful conversation and we (slightly awkwardly) captured some reflections after the event, in an attempt to embody a ‘multimodality’. 

See HTML version for audio commentary
Smell:
I loved the conversation we had about smell and about the body. It felt like many people pointed to how difficult it can be to recognise, articulate and some how capture certain feelings. Even with different methods. A conversation about the impact and affective responses to smells was quite evocative for me. I paid no attention to the smell, or to any environmental attributes of my seven research sites. Yet people shared their experiences of entering homes or research encounters where the smell of faeces, cat litter, maternity wards, sick and school dinners produce feelings of disgust, shame or fear and brings us viscerally into a research encounter. How can we capture these smells or provide a sense of them to readers, to research collaborators? I wondered if I had missed a trick – I can’t imagine the smell of my research school, or youth club – but I didn’t pay attention to it… is this something for me to pay attention to more in the future. The smell of a sexual health clinic waiting room perhaps…

Taste:
What great food!

But ultimately what this day gave me was a taste for collaboration. A taste of how team working for data collection and analysis can be generative and can enable you to take risks and think differently about your practice.

Vision:
Visually this was a stimulating day. There were pictures and visual representation of and from the Connectors Study. The whole room was the story of children’s participation, in the project and their experiences of everyday lives, captured in visual form. The Connectors Study team had engaged artists to capture and represent the research workshops where participants came together and connected with each other. I didn’t actually look at everything. I probably should have done but spent more time talking to people. I didn’t do a very good job at taking many pictures… wasn’t in ‘researcher’ mode.

Warmth:
Too cold, too hot. Took my coat on and off – the space heater although warm was noisy! By the end of the day my cheeks were rosy and dry and I didn’t know if I wanted my jumper on or off... Generally though, I felt a warmth towards and from everyone in the Connectors Study team and the participants. Although I have had the privilege to hear about the study, and meet some of the team before I felt that they very actively and warmly welcomed everyone and shared their stories with warmth in an engaging and exciting way.
Hearing:
I heard a lot, the chatter of people engaged in analysis activities where we could look through and gain a sense of the kinds of data the Connectors Study were working with. The contented hum of connections being made over lunchtime. The traffic outside. The space heater (see above). But also I felt that we, the participants, were heard. We were given the floor at one point – and people took it, if tentatively at first. People asked questions, sought clarification and listened. For me the chance to listen to, and be heard by Rebecca was such a treat. We do work in the same building at the university but it’s rare that we make, and can keep, time to discuss our research together – usually it’s conversations about teaching…

Speech:
I’ve spoke a lot about talking already in this note. But I think for me what the day consolidated is how different spaces and different methods can enable different kinds of speech, conversations and so on.

See HTML version for audio commentary

Thinking:
Oh I did a lot of thinking! But feel resistant to writing about that right now. See HTML version for audio commentary

Ego:
Overall I’d say that this day was a bit of an ego boost. It felt great to engage in and be part of a community of practice. To hear other peoples’ experiences, anxiety, challenges, and successes in relation to developing, using and representing finding from multimodal ethnographic research. I felt really good about my research and my methods – something that I do not always feel after attending conferences and workshops!
Elsie Whittington is a final year PhD researcher, co-funded by The Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth and Brook (UK’s largest national sexual health charity for young people). Her research aims to develop a broader understanding of sexual consent, specifically how young people think about, negotiate and enact consent in their everyday lives. Elsie is combining her youth work experience and participatory research principles to co-produce an account of sexual consent and negotiation that is rooted in young people’s experiences and understandings.