



## Drawing together: Art-based learning in the migration studies classroom

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses innovative pedagogical methods used in teaching migration studies, emphasising the transformative potential of art-based and object-based learning. Drawing upon a wide research background in migration studies, this approach integrates theoretical insights with practical teaching experiences to explore the educational benefits of engaging students, both emotionally and intellectually, in migration topics. The paper highlights the application of enquiry-based learning and learning by doing, as advocated by educational theorists such as Hannan et al. (2016) and Bates (2019), to actively involve students in the learning process through direct interaction with course materials. Central to this teaching approach is the use of visual artefacts produced by migrant children—in this case, drawings and photographs representing Scotland—which serve as primary tools for teaching transnational culture and research positionality. This method not only supports students' emotional engagement but also enhances their ability to conduct visual analysis and appreciate diverse socio-cultural perspectives. The learning strategies discussed here aim to foster a co-constructive learning environment in which students can explore and reflect on their own cultural assumptions and biases, as encouraged by Tasler & Dale (2021). The paper argues that such immersive and interactive learning experiences are key to helping students to develop transferable skills that extend beyond academic settings into personal and professional realms. The use of art in teaching migration studies facilitates a deeper understanding of the subject matter and promotes critical thinking and empathy among students from varied backgrounds. By transforming traditional pedagogical approaches, the paper demonstrates how modern education in migration studies can be enhanced to better prepare students for a globalised world, thereby making a compelling case for the broader adoption of these methods in higher education curricula.

**Keywords:** creative pedagogy, migration studies, art-based learning, co-constructive learning, visual analysis

### Introduction

Teaching migration across different courses can be exhilarating, challenging, and emotional work. In common with our students, we as lecturers want to combine our professional knowledge and personal experiences, and to transform both in ways which can address rapidly changing global socio-political situation. We have all lived through a historical period rich in events that have significantly shifted the theoretical approach to migration studies, such as the collapse of the socialist bloc, the creation of the European Union, Brexit, migrant crises, and new types of wars. The traditional theoretical approach and pedagogy in migration studies have constantly evolved to mirror the newly developing ideas in this academic field. However, not only is academic knowledge and practice evolving, but the increasingly globalised world brings ever more migrant experience to teachers and students who are travelling great distances from home to teach and learn, thus encountering migration not merely as an abstract experience, but in their everyday life. In this article, I will reflect on the current situation in higher education teaching

and learning in migration studies and offer some ideas for improving our pedagogies using the art-based approach.

### Teaching migration studies in higher education

The teaching of migration takes an interdisciplinary approach, with the aim of helping students to create knowledge of the multifaceted nature of migration phenomena and to master the skills needed to deal with the diverse challenges and perspectives in the field. Migration studies typically integrate knowledge from various disciplines, including economics, geography, history, political science, sociology, and legal studies (Jenks, 2020). These diverse disciplines, when blended together, can open up additional opportunities for a diverse audience of students enrolled in courses with components of migration studies. However, this situation can also be challenging, as some students may assume that part of the learning group knows more about the studied topic from previous courses.

Bearing in mind the constantly changing nature of global migration patterns, courses often focus on recent socio-economic events and implemented policies (O'Malley & Dittmar, 2021). Courses about migration involve constantly revised materials, with the focus to be selected for a particular class often being a matter of fierce debate. Lecturers consider the balance between the theoretical elements and their application in investigating contemporary socio-political and cultural situations. The main risk here is that the lecture material simply becomes descriptive rather than engaging students' curiosity and fostering their individual learning.

As a disciplinary approach, migration studies equip students with skills in both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A large body of statistical analysis describes the structure of migration flows, relevant policy changes, and their impact on societies (Statham, 2018). A qualitative approach within migration studies focuses on migrants' everyday lives, socio-cultural practices, and feelings of belonging (Kumar & Triandafyllidou, 2023; Hajro et al., 2022). Students with different areas of expertise and skills have a broad set of choices open to them with which to approach their projects from different perspectives, which increases their engagement. However, to master these skills, students need additional support, which can be provided via analytical methods courses.

Migration studies have always been, and continue to be, a sensitive subject due to the current volume of forced migration flows, the refugee crisis, and the ever-changing impacts of policies in democracies (Dhar, 2021; Bayram, 2022). Despite the sensitivity of the course content being provided, the teaching of migration needs to consider the diversity of student audiences. International students in UK universities currently comprise around one-quarter of the entire student population. Recent research employing a decolonisation approach has demonstrated how different interpretations of the same events can arise from the viewpoints of people from different countries (Lythberg et al., 2025).

Migration studies courses employ research-based teaching, which provides a crucial understanding of the practical implications of migration theories, and develops students' skills in order to do that. Students in general tend to enthusiastically engage with the lecturer's own first-hand experiences in doing research. This brief review of different approaches to teaching migration shows that there is room for new teaching methods to enhance teaching and learning processes in the field by increasing student engagement.

### Co-constructive teaching and learning: studying migration together

Participating in the workshop “How to talk about migration” (University of Glasgow, 2022) inspired me to explore some pedagogical approaches which can help to integrate emotional engagement in the acceptance of otherness with the ability to re-evaluate the personal positions of students. Engaging in migration studies learning should help students to create transferable knowledge that will be useful outside this particular course, in the wider world and life beyond academia (Whitchurch, 2012). Following Tasler & Dale (2021, p.5), I aim to “create the opportunity for learners to co-construct their learning” with me.

My teaching practice, as presented in this article, intends to transform learners by facilitating new emotional and critical thinking experiences. The main pedagogical frames of this teaching approach are enquiry-based learning (Hannan et al., 2016) and learning by doing (Bates, 2019). Both of these approaches aim to actively involve students in their own learning process. In highlighting the benefits of enquiry-based learning, it is necessary to carefully consider “the dynamics of the specific context in which it is introduced” (Deignan, 2009, p.13). In order to minimise the tensions which may arise within the group of students with highly diverse national and socio-cultural backgrounds studying migration, I decided to apply some techniques drawn from object-based learning, which is based on the use of objects (Chatterjee, 2011). This method enables students to interrogate pictures and photos as part of an enquiry-based learning approach (Hannan et al., 2016).

### Art-based approach in teaching migration

The integration of art in learning has become a popular teaching method, helping students to overcome difficulties in studying dry theoretical approaches and improving their engagement (Waller, 2017). A wide range of definitions for arts-based pedagogy (ABP) have been successfully offered across various disciplines (Leavy, 2015; Meltzer & Schwencke 2019; Perry et al., 2011; Rieger et al., 2015). ABP provides students with opportunities to participate in the creation of art objects, observe the process of creation, and reflect on the experiences of these processes (Leavy, 2015). ABP has proved successful in helping students to engage with, and make associations between, theoretical concepts and historical examples (Hunter & Frawley, 2023).

ABP is also being used for migration research in different contexts (McLean, 2022; Ryburn, 2024). This methodological genre was invented to address the need to develop more penetrating knowledge of sensitive and complex issues going beyond text and theory (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Picture drawing, one of the branches of this approach, has been widely used by migration scholars to explore expressive forms of life and living (Barone & Eisner 2012), to overcome the power imbalance between researchers and migrants, and to find new forms of knowledge production (Desille & Nikielska-Sekula, 2021; Jeffery et al., 2019; Lenette, 2019). ABP and the art-based approach to studying migration can fit together to create a unique seminar design.

### Seminar design: the drawing and analysis of pictures

One of the most popular approaches within ABP in migration studies is analysing pictures depicting the homes of migrant groups (Moskal, 2010). More specifically, picture sets produced by a group of migrant children can be used as teaching-learning objects (Ivashinenko, 2018). I collected a set of these pictures during my PhD project. The children were asked to draw a picture representing the country of their current

living. Another group of migrant children was asked to take photos of this country which they could send to their friends living abroad. These images formed the basis for a visual analysis of transnational socio-cultural practices (Vertovec, 2009). The integration of art-based learning into the classroom has a wide range of outcomes, such as changes in emotions, actions, intentions, and attitudes (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022). Among the significant strengths of this approach are its transformative power (Ogier & Ghosh, 2018) and its ability to foster learning through embodied cognition (Muhr, 2020).

The use of these migrant children's pictures (the first type of artefacts) and photos (the second type of artefacts) aims to achieve the following goals:

- 1) To emotionally engage students in the group work (Whitton & Langan, 2019) and reduce barriers to their participation in discussions of sensitive topics such as migration.
- 2) To actively evaluate and apply the concept of research positionality (Powell, 2022).
- 3) To build their visual analysis skills and then synthesise their knowledge of transnational theory (Muhr, 2020).

Students' emotional engagement in the class task is achieved by asking them to draw pictures which represent the discussed country, then compare their creations with the drawings done by other students and explain the reasons for their drawings. According to Fischbacher-Smith, this exercise helps students to increase their self-awareness and builds cognitive loops between their picture and themselves' (2020). The comparison of the different pictures gives the students some initial experience in understanding the wide range of people's possible perceptions. The impact of this task depends upon the cultural backgrounds of the participants. Among the students there may be people who are deeply rooted across several generations and were born in the countries being discussed; students from families who have migrated to the discussed country; and international students. Obviously, the teachers have no influence over the variety of people present in the class; it depends on the particular university course and its appeal to different groups of students. Understanding this diversity helps students to accept otherness, which is a key approach in migration studies. Students' diverse cultural backgrounds can create some challenges in finding commonalities in their interpretations, but it also helps them in preparing for discussions of research positionality.

Outside classrooms, scholars spend many years building deep understanding of how their positionalities can influence their research projects (Powell, 2022). One of the best ways to teach this concept to students is organising social experiments in a classroom (Roegman et al., 2016). Teaching students about abstract concepts such as transnational culture and research positionality requires a creative approach (Glăveanu, 2018). Through using a visual method, students can see with their own eyes the different recognition and interpretations given by their classmates to the same pictures, arising from their different socio-cultural backgrounds.

Object-based learning and art-based approaches offer the necessary tools for mastering the skills of seeing (Chatterjee, 2011). The students are given a set of questions to help them to pay special attention to colours, shapes, and proportions. According to Patterson (2017), students' horizons of observations will be broadened after having these experiences, and their sense of the nuances of the explored objects will be sharpened.

The recognition of cultural symbols requires some knowledge of socio-cultural practices and the concept of transnational culture. Student engagement can be increased by organising a game and awarding a prize to the group which finds and explains the most cultural symbols in the images produced by migrant children.

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Including gaming in classroom activities has some additional benefits, such as improving participation, breaking up routines, and engaging creativity (Whitton & Langan, 2019). Different student groups can produce analyses with different depths, depending on their knowledge and preparation before the seminar. However, the co-creation of their visual analysis is more meaningful for their learning than an explanation provided by the teacher (Tasler & Dale, 2021).

The analysis of photos taken by migrant children enhances the findings related to the pictures. In looking at these visual materials, students can use several approaches and compare the differences between the visual analyses of the pictures and photos (Brown et al., 2020). This task aims to sharpen their visual analysis skills as well as further developing their critical thinking.

### Discussion

Art-based pedagogy (ABP) has been widely implemented across different disciplines, and has proven to be a highly effective way to “better understand the theory-based material, engage in a higher level of thinking/analysis, feel more confident in their abilities to write about theories covered in the course, apply theory in the real world, contextualise historical content, and enhance their memory of theories and concepts” (Hunter & Frawley, 2023, p. 21). However, debate persists around delivery and learning outcomes. Arts-based pedagogies change the power balance between students and teachers, as learners have been given the role of knowledge makers and creators of their learning experiences. At the same time, teachers cannot predict the ideas which students will express through their artwork, their interpretations of their classmates’ work, or the emotions arising from the learning experience. Overall, this uncertainty means that “the novelty of artistic learning experiences can be freeing for some and a source of stress for others” (Carroll, 2018, p.5). Accepting these roles may be a little too easy for students who already have previous experience using these methods. The emotional aspects of art-based methods have been seen both as one of the main drivers and as a barrier to the further implementation of this approach (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022). The second factor potentially preventing the participation of students in such activities is a lack of confidence to draw the picture. According to Patterson (2017), some students may believe that only people born with artistic abilities or who have received special education are able to produce something meaningful. To overcome these barriers, students in the designed seminar described in the previous section were offered the opportunity not only to draw the picture but to select their own photos related to the same ideas.

An art-based approach may create additional challenges for students with vision impairment who cannot clearly see the art objects offered or produce their own. In this case, they can describe what they would like to draw and work with the verbal descriptions produced by their learning assistants.

In designing and performing the art-based approach several times in my own teaching, I have received positive feedback from students who were happy to participate in these activities, which they said helped them ‘to change their attitudes towards their ability to meaningful produce art pieces and perform visual analysis’. I have not yet conducted a large-scale formal educational research study that investigates this approach; however, I am planning to do so in future.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the literature review of education theory shows that transformative education based on a creative approach is the main vector in developing modern higher education. The passive transfer of knowledge from teacher to students has increasingly been replaced by collaboration and a greater emphasis on student agency. The implementation of an art-based approach in the study of migration increases students' engagement in the learning process and transforms their roles from passive receivers of knowledge to active knowledge makers. In my experience, it also contributes to increasing students' emotional engagement in classroom activities, reduces the barriers to their participation, and supports interactions, not only between me as a teacher and my students, but between students with diverse backgrounds too. Art-based pedagogy has excellent potential to prompt emotions and create opportunities for learners to have unique experiences, allowing deeper understanding and learning through embodied cognition.

## Biographies

*Dr Nina Ivashinenko* is a lecturer at the University of Glasgow, teaching research methods and Central East European Studies courses from undergraduate through to postgraduate levels. Her PhD explored migrant communities in Scotland. She co-convenes the Migration and Mobilities Research Group and actively engages in research on migration.

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