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Addressing knowledge inequality: visual and arts-based methods as a possibility

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the issue of knowledge inequality, particularly in knowledge production between the world's developed countries (the Global North) and developing and least developed countries (the Global South) (e.g., Castro Torres & Alburez-Gutierrez, 2022; Demeter, 2020). However, knowledge inequalities do not only exist at a macro level between two parts of the world. It also exists between two individuals at a micro level. The issue of knowledge inequalities is a pressing challenge for modern society, which can result in other forms of inequalities and other problems, including crimes, poverty, and conflicts.

To address the issue of knowledge inequalities, also the vision of Society & Culture, collective efforts must be made to democratize knowledge. We academics, with both our hats as educators (spreading knowledge by teaching) and researchers (generating knowledge by researching), can play an essential role in closing the gap of knowledge inequalities. In this article, I argue that academics can employ visual and arts-based methods (VAbMs) to democratize knowledge in their teaching and researching, by removing the barriers to non-academic individuals' access to knowledge, involving research participants in knowledge production, and enhancing their participation in knowledge dissemination.

In each of the three aspects: knowledge accessibility, knowledge production, and knowledge dissemination, I will first use a representative example of effective practice to explain the usefulness of VAbMs and then explore its implications for our teaching and research. By sharing this article as an entry for Society & Culture Spotlight PGR and ECR writing competition, I hope this proposal can get across to a wider community at Warwick and hopefully it will engender academics' interest in using VAbMs to work with our students, research participants, non-academic partners, and colleagues within and beyond our discipline, to play our due role in closing the gap of knowledge inequalities.

Before proceeding to this main part of the article, I will briefly introduce VAbMs and share my reflexivity on putting forward such a proposal.

1. Visual and arts-based methods (VAbMs)

VAbMs are notoriously difficult to define, due to their nature as a methodology in a constant process of creation and redefinition (Rolling, 2010, as cited in Gunilla et al., 2019). For clarity, this article understands VAbMs as an umbrella term for both visual methods and arts-based methods. Visual methods can be interpreted as the use of visual material, although in most cases, these visual materials can also be categorized as arts-based methods. According to Chamberlain et al. (2018), arts-based research can involve various forms, including fiction-based approaches (e.g., flash fiction, short story, or novella), poetic approaches, drama-based approaches, visual art genres (e.g., photographs, collage, drawing, painting, sculpture), film and video approaches and other approaches (e.g., music or dance).

Various forms of VAbMs have been widely used in research across different disciplines, primarily in anthropology (e.g., Marcus, 1998), sociology (e.g., Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014), education (e.g., Gray et al., 2022), psychology (e.g., Chamberlain et al., 2018), applied linguistics (e.g., Ahn, 2021; Greenier & Moodie, 2021) and health education (e.g., Kpobi et al., 2024).

The purpose of using VAbMs in research is closely related to the issue of knowledge inequality. For example, a systematic review of literature by Fraser and al Sayah (2011) indicates that various forms of VAbMs, including visual arts (photographs and drawings), media (performance arts), and literary arts (poetry), have been widely employed in health research for knowledge generation/production and knowledge dissemination/translation. Similarly, an example from applied linguistics also demonstrates the usefulness of VAbMs in knowledge generation/production. Ahn (2021) uses participants' drawings and written descriptions of the drawings to explore how Korean undergraduate English learners portray themselves, before and after English mastering English, and after failing to master English. She argues that through drawing, participants are empowered with an alternative means to express themselves and successfully visualize what is in their minds.

2. Reflexivity on VAbMs

My interest in VAbMs began in 2022 when I participated in a zine-making workshop organized by colleagues from sociology and successfully visualized my story of navigating challenges in academia as a female doctoral student (see Fig. 1 for the two zine pages I created). I was amazed that zine-making, a typical VAbM, enabled me to tell my lived experiences in such a fun, flexible, and creative way and even open up to share my most challenging life stories with a group of people I had just met (see a detailed account in Zhuo, 2024). Additionally, zine-making allowed me to express what I might not have been able to verbally, reexamine my life through this zine artifact, and get validation/support from other participants through sharing my story with them. This experience inspires me that knowledge production can be fun, ethical, creative, and empowering for research participants when a VAbM, like zine-making, is employed. Zine-making as a VAbM will be elaborated further with examples later in this article.

In my role as a senior GTA for MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) students in Applied Linguistics, I also recognize the usefulness of VAbMs in teaching and learning. For example, one typical activity we use to strengthen students' understanding of the importance of Long's (1981) input

and interaction hypotheses and the associated theories of conversational modifications is drawing and describing. In this activity, students are arranged to sit in groups of three (students A, B, and C). First, student A draws a street scene with at least five items and describes the drawing without showing it to B. Then, student B produces a drawing as similar to A's as possible, by listening to A's description and asking any questions to clarify the details of the drawing. Student C observes the whole process and takes notes of any communication breakdown and meaning negation moves. Finally, each group reports their learning from this activity. Through my teaching, I have observed that students not only enjoy this learning experience but also share some valuable insights into how they may use the knowledge in their teaching in the future. This observation convinces me that learning or accessing knowledge can also be fun and transformative through a VAbM.

Certainly, my experiences with VAbMs are not limited to the above two stories and it is beyond the scope of this article to list all the relevant scenarios. Nevertheless, the two examples have sufficiently explained why I value VAbMs in my research and teaching and why I believe that VAbMs can be a possibility for us academics to tackle the issue of knowledge inequality by democratizing knowledge in our work. Now I will proceed to explain how VAbMs contribute to the three aspects of achieving knowledge equality: knowledge accessibility, knowledge production, and knowledge dissemination.



Fig. 1

3. VAbMs in closing the gap in knowledge inequality

3.1 VAbMs for knowledge accessibility

The arts are considered powerful and accessible forms of communication that can effectively convey knowledge by capturing attention and fostering meaningful connections (Scott et al., 2013). Research

also indicates that promoting arts-based methods, like drawing, can make a visible difference in students' learning, even those identified as reluctant readers and/or struggling with print literacy (Vicars & Senior, 2013). Therefore, academics can consider the use of VAbMs in their teaching and research to effectively impart knowledge to their students and non-academics.

One representative example of the usefulness of VAbMs in enhancing non-academics' access to knowledge is infographic summaries of selected secondary research, each of which can be finished in 5 minutes and practitioners can gain new evidence-based knowledge for their everyday work. In applied linguistics, this has been promoted by a team of TESOL researchers on their website [TESOLgraphics](https://tesolgraphics.com). The infographic summaries are produced by these TESOL researchers and promoted to teachers in the TESOL, who are interested in evidence-based language teaching and learning practices (see Fig. 2 for an example of their infographics).

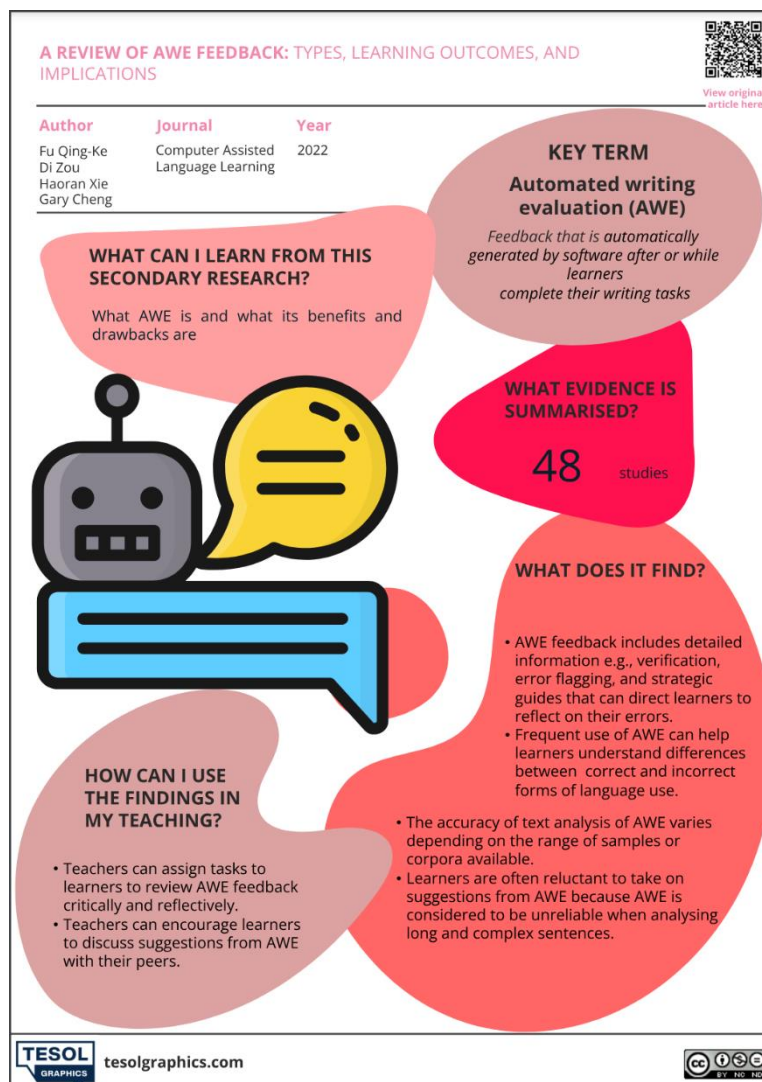


Fig. 2

(Automated writing evaluation feedback by TESOLgraphics, from:

https://c918c033-46a8-4a3f-ae89-5831781dcd8.filesusr.com/ugd/a10835_a5df994973594914ab63108c78ad2328.pdf)

By reading Fig. 2, teachers can easily understand the key findings of the review research and have their key takeaways for their teaching. If interested, they can also scan the QR code above to read the original

article. As TESOLgraphics proudly promotes on its website, these infographics can enable “digest-able TESOL secondary research at your fingertips”. Indeed, teachers are busy (Farrell, 2004; Shaddock, 2014) and often lack the luxury of spending a considerable amount of time reading research. These infographics not only enhance their access to more knowledge produced by academics but also might arouse their interest in exploring the original texts and/or investigating the findings in their practice. In a word, these infographics, as a form of visual arts, demystify research and make academic findings socially inclusive knowledge of the public.

This example has multiple implications for our role as an educator and researcher. For our teaching, infographics can be incorporated into reading tasks and as a form of formative assessment. For example, to arouse students’ interest in required and optional readings for the module we teach, we can produce a collection of similar infographics based on each of the articles on the list. By sharing these infographics instead of a list of readings with our students, it is more likely that students will read the original articles or at least have a brief understanding of all that are on the reading list. Certainly, we can also ask students to produce infographics based on their reading, constituting a form of formative assessment. For our research, we can produce corresponding infographics based on our research project or research publications. This can contribute to the public’s easier access to our research findings and increase the impact of our research.

3.2 VAbMs for knowledge production

As the famous quote from Benjamin Franklin goes, “*Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn*”. To gain knowledge, one must be involved in the process of knowledge production. In fact, knowledge coproduction is essential in ensuring the effectiveness of the democratization of knowledge (Arocena et al., 2018). Additionally, enhancing knowledge production capacities can contribute to significant improvement in human welfare (John & Rempala, 2024).

VAbMs have been found effective in knowledge coproduction with community members in different disciplines. For example, in social work, VAbMs have been used to access the often-silenced knowledge of marginalized groups and thus enable the development of interventions based on the knowledge (e.g., drawing in Segal-Engelchin et al., 2020). Similarly, in consumer culture research, VAbMs enables participants to share details of their fantasy experiences (the conscious experiencing of something as not real) with emotions and thus allows researchers to transgress the restrictions of traditional linguistic and textual research methods (Seregina, 2020).

One good example of knowledge coproduction with VAbMs in teaching and research is through zine-making. Zines are small DIY magazines, created by “piecing together” (Lonsdale, 2015, p. 8) multimodal resources, as shown in Fig. 1. Through zine-making activity, participants/students reflect on their life experiences based on a given topic, visualize their life stories in a zine artefact, and share their life stories through oral/written zine-explanations. Researchers/teachers then can gain insights into their participants’/students’ inner voices in the process and gather data to triangulate their analysis of participants’/students’ life stories. Additionally, by collecting and compiling all the zine pages/zines, a collective zine can be produced, a form of knowledge primarily contributed by participants/students. Fig. 3 shows a collective zine produced by international PhD students in the UK on the interplay of language, wellbeing and productivity (Zhuo, 2024). In my article, I argue that zine-making, as a form of VAbMs, enables participants/students to engage in knowledge production in a fun, creative, ethical and empowering way.



Fig. 3

Zine-making for knowledge coproduction can also provide some inspiration for us to democratize knowledge in our teaching and research. For our teaching, zine-making can be easily integrated in diagnostic teaching, to explore individual students' understanding and experiences of the teaching topic before, during and after our teaching. For research, zine-making can be particularly useful in narrative inquiry, exploring people's life challenges, identity, resilience, burnout, and other emotions based on their life stories depicted in their zines.

3.3 VAbMs for knowledge dissemination

In addition to knowledge production, VAbMs also play a crucial role in knowledge dissemination, particularly in health research (Boydell et al., 2012; Lafrenière et al., 2013). It has been found that VAbMs generate a deeper understanding of the experiences of human subjects' participation in health research. With VAbMs, researchers can improve the effectiveness of communicating their findings to the public. For example, in biomedical science, a form of VAbMs, visual storytelling is found to enhance knowledge dissemination (Botsis et al., 2020).

One example of how powerful and compelling VAbMs can be used to tell stories in health research is short films on [MOVIE-MENT](#), a website uses VAbMs to promote, support and ignite action and change, particularly in the areas of mental health, suicide prevention, and women/child/human rights. In a mental health research project conducted in Ghana and Indonesia, two ethnographic films are used to explore collaboration between faith-based healers and mental health workers to improve care for patients with mental illnesses. In the film about the research in Indonesia (see the screencast of the trailer in Fig. 4), the film shows the collision between mental health care and faith-based/traditional healing and the urgent need for the improved care for people with mental illness in this region.

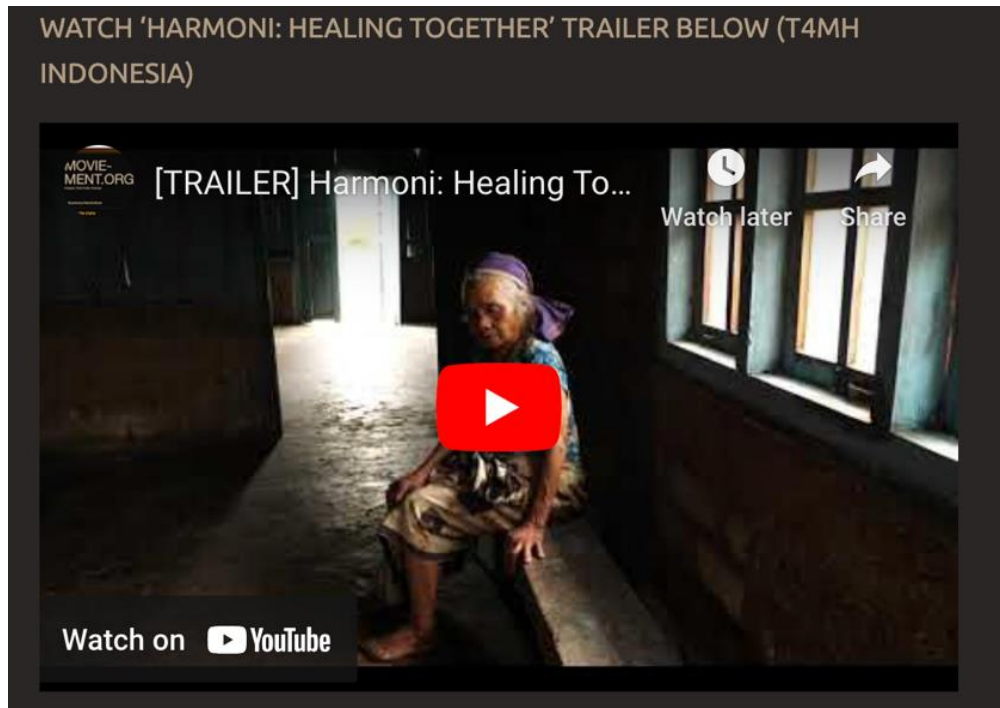


Fig. 4

(Source: <https://movie-ment.org/together4mh/>)

The film is informative and intriguing for non-academic audiences and someone outside of health research, including me to learn about the attempts by mental workers to establish collaboration with local healers, in contexts where ritual and spiritual healing practices are prevailing.

Films or videos for knowledge dissemination can also have implications for our teaching and research. For our teaching, films or videos can be used as an introduction to some abstract or challenging teaching points or as a tool for assessment. For one module on *Specialism in Teacher Education and Development* I took at Warwick as a MA TESOL student in 2020, the assignment included a video presentation on the assignment (20%) and a written assignment (80%). [The video](#) I created by using VideoScribe not only satisfied the assessment requirement but also deepened my understanding of the topic of my written assignment. Additionally, it also allowed me to disseminate my learning/research with the wider public when I make my video publicly available on YouTube (see Fig. 5 for the screencast of the video).



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Fig. 5

For our research, we can also consider video as a medium for the dissemination of research, if this is contextually feasible and appropriate. Additionally, to maximize the benefits and power of VAbMs to disseminate our research, we need to be aware of some difficult decisions, including product issue (whether to involve professional artists), representational issues (the degree of alignment between creative work and actual research findings), and ethical issues (the authorship and the protection of the anonymity of human subjects) (Lafrenière et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued the potential of VAbMs for academics like me to play our role in addressing the issue of knowledge inequality. With VAbMs, academics can enhance knowledge accessibility for non-academics, involve participants in knowledge production, and enable effective knowledge dissemination among the public. To explain the usefulness of VAbMs in the three aspects, I used concrete examples of effective practices and provided detailed suggestions for teaching and research. These examples and suggestions in turn prove the value of VAbMs in different disciplines. In this sense, VAbMs offers enormous opportunities for academics to work across disciplines.

It is worth mentioning that although the three aspects are argued in separate sections, they are interconnected in nature. The issue of knowledge inequality results from the complex interplay among the three aspects, and VAbMs can be a possibility for addressing this issue by contributing to the three aspects concurrently, as shown in Fig. 6. Potential

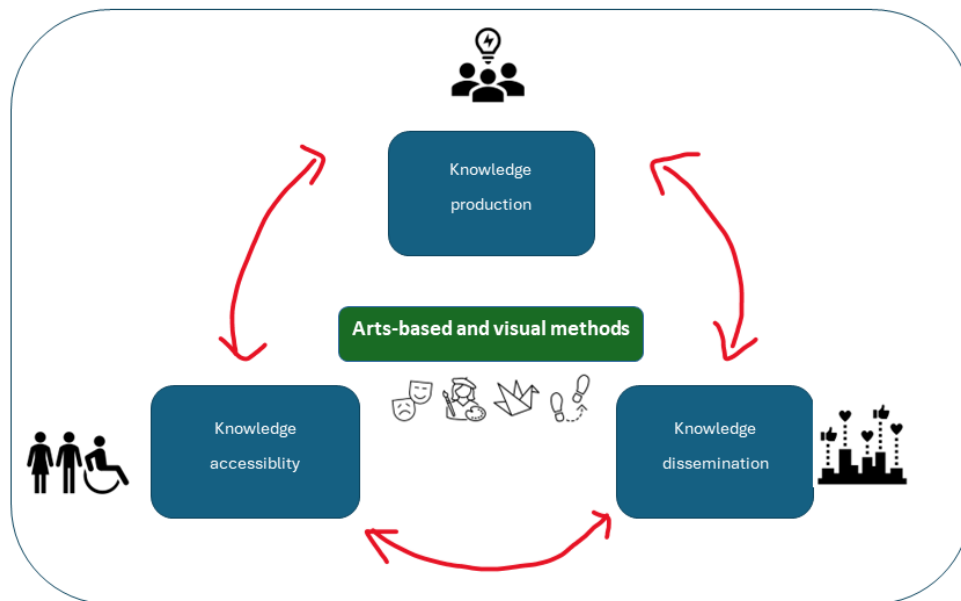


Fig. 6

As can be inferred from my reflexivity and the examples of effective practices, VAbMs transform individuals from passive knowledge consumers to active knowledge (co)producers, translators, or disseminators. This aligns with a powerful quotation from Paulo Freire’s seminal works, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*.

“Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

(Freire, 2005, p. 72)

This quotation highlights the fact that knowledge does not emerge in a vacuum or through passive reception. Instead, learning is a social act, and individuals generate new knowledge only through constant inquiries into real-world problems and challenges. This quotation also reinforces my argument for VAbMs as a possibility for us to play our role address knowledge inequality. It is my hope that this article will provide inspiration for academics across disciplines in their teaching and research and take joint efforts with both academic and non-academic stakeholders in addressing the evident knowledge inequalities in today’s world.

(2763 words)

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