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To cite this article: Ruksana Beigi (08 Apr 2025): Doctoral study ponderings: the visibility of researcher positionality through an A/r/tographical lens, Journal of Visual Art Practice, DOI: [10.1080/14702029.2025.2480426](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2025.2480426)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2025.2480426>



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Published online: 08 Apr 2025.



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Doctoral study ponderings: the visibility of researcher positionality through an A/r/tographical lens

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ABSTRACT

In the realm of educational research, understanding the dynamic and intricate interplay between researcher positionality and the visual is crucial for fostering reflexivity and innovation. As an offshoot of the author's doctoral studies, this paper embarks on a journey to unravel the visual formation and evolution of researcher positionality in data collection through the raw analysis of video and photographic materials. Central to this exploration is the conceptual framework proposed by Irwin (2013, 'Becoming A/R/Tography'. *Studies in Art Education* 54 (3): 198–215), who elucidates the concept of *Becoming A/R/Tography* by shedding light on the multifaceted roles researchers assume – as artists, researchers, and educators – throughout their research activities. In employing this framework, I explore it as a rich theoretical lens that provides a nuanced understanding of research positions. Through tangible expressions, it highlights how researchers' presence becomes more visible within the research landscape. This perspective aligns with the benefits of A/R/Tography in fostering reflexivity and positionality in educational research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 July 2024
Accepted 11 March 2025

KEYWORDS

A/r/tography; doctoral studies; early career researchers; visual data; visual methodologies; positionality

Introduction

Educational research is a vibrant and ever-evolving domain shaped by the intricate interplay of researchers' perspectives, methodologies, and the diverse contexts in which they are situated. Central to this landscape is the concept of researcher positionality, which underscores the importance of acknowledging one's subjective identity and its profound impact on the research process. In qualitative inquiry, particularly, there has been a notable surge in the recognition of positionality that seeks to explore deeper into how researchers navigate their roles and relationships within the intricate tapestry of the research ecosystem (Bourke 2014; Gurr et al. 2024; Wilson, Janes, and Williams 2022). This is even more so for early career researchers and doctoral students. Traditionally, reflexive writing has served as a cornerstone for uncovering and addressing the nuanced dimensions of positionality (Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall 2023). However,

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there remains an underexplored avenue within this discourse – the tangible and visible manifestations through which researchers embody and make visible their identities within the research environment. This article aims to shed light on the significance of recognizing and analyzing these visible forms, offering insights into their implications for the research process and its outcomes.

Research positionality and reflexivity

Early career researchers and doctoral students are expected to understand how their own life experiences, viewpoints, backgrounds, and who they are, affect their research. This includes who they work with, the questions they ask, the methods they use, who they share their findings with, and even how they write about it all (Bucholtz et al. 2023). This focus on the researcher is based on years of social sciences that question the idea of research being completely objective. The focus is known as positionality.

Positionality ‘reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study’ (Savin-Baden and Major 2013, 71). It is based on what Knight and Keifer-Boyd (2019) suggest as ‘situating, locating, and positioning oneself’. It not only encompasses the researcher’s background, beliefs, and experiences but also the inherent biases and privileges they bring to the research (Holmes 2020). This comprises of intersecting factors such as race, gender, class, nationality, and personal experiences. By probing deeper, the concept of positionality encompasses an individual’s worldview and stance regarding a research task within its social and political context (Rowe 2014).

This worldview, often referred to as ‘where the researcher is coming from’, entails fundamental beliefs regarding the essence of social reality and what is knowable (ontological assumptions), perspectives on the nature of knowledge (epistemological assumptions), and assumptions about human nature and autonomy, which encompasses how researchers engage with and navigate their surroundings (Grix 2019; Holmes 2020; Marsh et al. 2017). The aim then is to prompt researchers to acknowledge their subjectivity and how it may influence the formulation of research questions, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and so on.

Moreover, recognizing one’s positionality fosters transparency and rigor in research by allowing for critical self-awareness, and carefully considering where one stands at each point and turn of the research (Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall 2023). Throughout the research process, one’s positionality is always under scrutiny, and by continuously interrogating this, one can strive for greater objectivity and integrity in their work, ultimately enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings, or can we? Although researchers bring their own experiences, biases, and backgrounds to the table that shape their unique perspectives, strong research requires active engagement with this perspective, and this is where reflexivity comes in.

Reflexivity is an ongoing process of critically examining your position throughout the research journey. As Holmes (2020, 2) suggests, it is ‘an essential process for informing, developing, and shaping positionality’. By continuously questioning and challenging your own assumptions, reflexivity allows for the construction of knowledge with greater nuance and rigor (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). It empowers researchers to critique their work by acknowledging limitations and biases, while also transparently disclosing

their ‘position’ in the research – where am I coming from? For example, one may question how their background might influence research, but reflexivity goes beyond this. It’s an ongoing conversation you have with yourself where you think critically about what motivates you to research this topic, how your chosen methods might be biased, and how your analysis of data might be colored by your experiences.

So, while positionality is important, reflexivity is the bigger umbrella. It is about constantly examining everything you bring to the research, not just your background. Put simply, positionality is a critical self-reflection on what we know and believe, and reflexivity is a critical self-reflection on what we do with this knowledge and how it impacts our research. This reflexivity fosters a deeper understanding of one’s role in knowledge production and ultimately enhances the integrity and credibility of research outputs (Ide and Beddoe 2024).

The dilemmas of positionality

There is no doubt then that human identity is multifaceted, and that one brings multiple identities, privileges, and power to research (Kassan et al. 2020). Therefore, gaining a nuanced comprehension of our positionality and its potential influence on our work is far from straightforward. The reality is that researchers still struggle with identifying their positionality, normally based on the assumption that one is already aware of it and able to convey this in written form. This is supported by research studies on early career researchers, which found that they often have difficulty both in identifying exactly what it is and in outlining their own (Holmes 2020; Jacobson and Mustafa 2019; Wilson, Janes, and Williams 2022). In many ways, doctoral students are also still novice researchers and as such, they struggle with identifying their positionality too. It is not that they don’t have positionality, but that they don’t know how to put it into words.

One reason for this that Day (2012) discusses is how there are many layers of complexity involved, particularly given the evolving nature of our identities as highlighted by Naples (2003). This process is intricate and may pose a formidable challenge, particularly for the novice researcher, who must navigate the myriad of factors and approaches inherent in understanding and addressing their position. For example, two people can have the same demographic features and yet, experience wholly different manifestations of their positionality based on a host of contextual, psychological, and interpersonal factors and how they choose to interpret and respond to those aspects.

Some researchers may also lack formal training or guidance on how to engage in reflexive practice and communicate their positionality effectively (Heath 2018). Without clear frameworks or support structures, researchers may struggle to navigate the complexities of self-reflection and expression. However, at the same time, this complexity is further compounded by the multitude of contributing factors and diverse theoretical and methodological traditions available for researchers to engage within their inquiry. This is because different disciplines cultivate distinct ‘ways of seeing’, and doctoral students as well as early career researchers are inducted into these perspectives, whose widespread adoption then has resulted in a tradition of formulaic methodological templates (Köhler, Smith, and Bhakoo 2019). For example, the lenses of intersectionality and the much-used insider and outsider concept (Yip 2023).

Further, attempting to distil this complexity into words presents a daunting task in itself as the intricacies of one's identity cannot be fully captured through language alone, which could lead to potential oversimplification or oversight of significant aspects of a position. This is because language inherently has limitations in conveying the nuances of human experience. Researchers may find it challenging to express their positionality adequately, particularly when attempting to convey subtle or abstract concepts related to identity and social location. Linguistic barriers may further impede effective communication of positionality in multicultural or multilingual research contexts (Hennink 2008; Lorette 2023).

Despite these challenges however, acknowledging and conveying one's positionality is crucial for ensuring transparency, reflexivity, and ethical integrity in research. Researchers must situate themselves within their work, allowing readers to understand their perspectives and influences because positionality shapes the research process, including the questions asked, the methods chosen, and the interpretation of findings. By making these influences explicit, researchers foster trust, credibility, and a deeper understanding of how knowledge is constructed. So, what is one to do? Here is where I introduce the concept of *pondering*.

Pondering in research and positionality

In research, pondering is the act of engaging deeply with ideas, questioning assumptions, and allowing thoughts to meander through the complexities of knowledge. It is not merely about seeking answers but about embracing uncertainty, reflecting on multiple perspectives, and recognizing the interplay between what is known and what remains elusive (de Roo 2021). I came up with the concept of pondering as I engaged with it multiple times throughout my doctoral studies, and still do. Pondering fosters intellectual curiosity, guiding researchers to refine their inquiries, challenge biases, and uncover hidden connections. It is through this process of contemplation that deeper insights emerge, enriching both the research itself and the researcher's understanding of their own positionality.

Positionality is deeply intertwined with the act of pondering. As researchers reflect on their place within the study, they must engage in this thoughtful dance of consideration, questioning how their backgrounds shape their interpretations and interactions with the subject matter. Pondering allows for an honest exploration of one's subjectivity, helping to move beyond surface-level objectivity toward a more nuanced, self-aware approach (Olmos-Vega et al. 2022). By continuously engaging in this process, researchers cultivate reflexivity, ensuring that their work remains transparent, ethical, and enriched by a deeper understanding of the complexities at play (Palaganas et al. 2017; von Seggern, Holst, and Singer-Brodowski 2023).

The following poem attempts to capture the essence of pondering as a reflective, almost meditative process, when considering not just my positionality but the whole process of researching.

Ponderings by Ruksana Beigi

In the realm of thought, pondering waltzes gracefully. It's a dance of consideration, a swirling exploration where facts – or their absence – find their place along the mind's edge. Like

guests in a grand ballroom of consciousness, they mingle and settle, drawn by the interplay of truth and curiosity. This delicate dance weaves a vibrant tapestry of understanding. Each twist and turn in the labyrinth of contemplation is an invitation to dive deeper, to explore the gardens of imagination. It's a journey where the mundane and profound entwine, composing a symphony of thought that transcends the ordinary. Let us embark on this enchanting voyage of pondering, where every mysterious puzzle piece enriches the intricate mosaic of knowledge.

The imagery of a waltz and a grand ballroom illustrates how thoughts interact, shift, and shape our understanding. Pondering is not a passive act but a lively engagement with ideas, where curiosity and truth move in harmony. In relation to positionality, this act of deep reflection is crucial – just as thoughts swirl and settle in contemplation, so too must researchers navigate their own positionality within their work. Through this poem, I wanted to emphasize that contemplation is not just an intellectual exercise but an essential step in understanding how our perspectives influence the knowledge we create (Mosteo and Quintas 2024).

Pondering therefore has bought forth the reality from the dilemmas of positionality that investigating and clarifying one's positionality takes time. New researchers, including doctoral students, should recognize that exploring their positionality and writing about it can take considerable time and much 'soul searching', it is not a process that can be rushed (Holmes 2020, 3–4) with Savin-Baden and Major (2013) outlining three key ways in which researchers can start to understand their positionality: (1) acknowledging personal biases, (2) considering their relationship with participants, and (3) recognizing the influence of the research context. Pondering however, has enabled me to add a fourth dimension, and that is when language and writing become difficult, locating the *visibility* of researcher positionality in the data. This not only means that researchers must also be mindful of how their physical presence and demeanor may impact the research process and outcomes, including aspects such as body language, attire, and gestures but also how one can 'locate' oneself through the visual before attempting to 'situate' and write about it.

The visibility of positionality can assist in early reflexivity and understanding the what and the how of positionality – how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein (Foster 1988, ix). Contemporary research acknowledges the pivotal role of researcher positionality in shaping the research process and outcomes, however, the visibility of researcher positionality remains obscured in many scholarly works, potentially undermining the transparency and rigor of research findings. This article advocates for the significance of making researcher positionality more visible through the integration of visual methodologies into the research process.

The role of the visual

There are three aspects of the visual that I wish to explore in this section, visual data collection, visual literacy, and visuals in a/r/tography. In research, 'visuals' refer to any form of imagery, graphics, or visual representation used to communicate ideas, data, or findings (Mitchell 2011; Rose 2022). These can serve multiple purposes, from enhancing understanding to offering alternative ways of interpreting information. The meaning of visuals can vary depending on the field and methodology but in essence, visuals in

research serve as tools to enhance clarity, deepen interpretation, and engage oneself and others in ways that words alone sometimes cannot (Franconeri et al. 2021). They also allow for greater reflexivity, helping researchers explore their own positionality and the perspectives of those they study (Versey 2024).

Academia is an almost completely textual world that relies heavily on the written word for communication, research, and teaching (Orritt and Powell 2022). From written works such as research papers, scholarly articles, and journals, to textbooks, academic discourse is deeply rooted in text-based formats where researchers can convey complex ideas, theories, and research findings in a structured and detailed manner, which can then be easily shared with the broader academic community and the public, such as this article. However, in today's visually driven world, where images and videos are ubiquitous, visuals have become increasingly important for effective communication and critical thinking (Cleland and MacLeod 2021; Kędra 2018; Matusiak et al. 2019, 124), and I argue, for rethinking how one does research, analyzes research, and communicates research. It is also where the image can give researchers and scholars a chance to increase the quality of their research and to connect with learners and readers in more interesting ways but most importantly, for this article, to be able to locate one's position(s) in research.

Visual data collection

Based on the premise that in some contexts, images work better than words, visual methodologies are a collection of methods used to collect data (Barbour 2014; Glaw et al. 2017; Rose 2022). They involve the use of visual materials or techniques which can include anything from using photographs and videos as primary sources of data collection to employing visual aids such as diagrams or maps to illustrate complex concepts. Visual methods use a huge range of images including maps, drawings, graphic novels, photos, film, video, selfies, and diagrams, to name a few. They offer unique insights and perspectives that may not be captured through traditional textual approaches alone and allow researchers to explore topics in a more holistic and multifaceted manner, often revealing patterns and connections that might otherwise remain hidden. They add to traditional methods by capturing more detail and a different kind of data where the visual lays bare the mundane phenomena, taken for granted, or often difficult to articulate (O'Connell 2012).

Visual methods offer an innovative approach to research by facilitating dialogue, enriching data, and empowering researchers to navigate complex or delicate subjects (Pain 2012). However, the integration of visual methods necessitates a reassessment of conventional data generation and analysis approaches because despite the presence of diverse analytical frameworks and guidebooks for textual and visual material examination, research reports often fall short of providing thorough explanations of how these elements are unified (Trombetta and Cox 2022).

Visual literacy

Visual literacy, often associated with its prominent role in education – visual literacy education – was first coined in 1969 by John Debes, who was the founder of the International Visual Literacy Association:

Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. (27)

It can apply to all sorts of visual media, including illustrations, graphs, infographics, animations, visual art, video clips, images, and motion pictures. To put it simply, visual literacy is the ability to make meaning from what we see from what is collected from visual methods. It enables researchers to critically engage with visual culture, uncovering layers of meaning and context within various forms of visual expression (Rose 2022). As research is increasingly incorporating visual techniques, such as photography, video, visual ethnographies, photo elicitation, or participatory mapping, proficiency in visual literacy then becomes essential for capturing, analyzing, and interpreting visual data effectively (Rose 2014).

If researchers acquire visual literacies, not only can they better understand the visual but can also locate themselves within the research landscape (Ballesteros-Mejía and Madero 2024). Researchers can critically analyze visual forms and recognize the various elements and symbols embedded within them that show their positionality. This understanding allows the uncovering of implicit meanings, ideologies, and power dynamics present. Researchers can further explore how these visual elements shape societal norms, values, identities, and the phenomena under investigation. Being visually literate plays a crucial role in this process, as it equips researchers with the skills to deconstruct and interpret the messages conveyed through images, symbols, colors, and composition (Lundy and Stephens 2015), and to reflect and perpetuate cultural assumptions, power relations, and social constructions (Karaïskou 2024).

It enables one to see beyond the surface, recognizing how choices are often shaped by the creator's background, experiences, and positionality. By developing visual literacy, researchers can engage more deeply with data, uncovering not just what is shown but also what is left out or obscured. This critical lens allows for a richer understanding of how visuals both construct and challenge knowledge, offering insights into the broader social, political, and cultural forces at play.

A/r/tography

A/r/tography is a research approach that integrates artmaking, educational inquiry, and reflection. The term stands for 'art', 'research', and 'teaching', reflecting the intersection of these three domains. Originally developed by Canadian scholars, a/r/tography expands the traditional boundaries of academic research by incorporating artistic practices, such as visual arts, music, drama, and dance, into the research process (Irwin and de Cosson 2004; Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 2005; Springgay et al. 2008). It emphasizes the use of multiple modes of expression to explore complex phenomena and generate new knowledge. Additionally, the concept of 'graphy' integrates imagery and text, aligning art with narrative as a collaborative effort – an intersection of art and graphy, or image and word (Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 2005, 900). These elements are not separate or independent but rather work together to generate new understandings (Leggo et al. 2011, 240).

A/r/tographic research often involves collaboration among artists, educators, and researchers, blurring the lines between these roles. Through creative engagement with

the research subject, a/r/tographers aim to deepen understanding, challenge assumptions, and provoke critical reflection. Overall, a/r/tography offers a unique research approach that values creativity, intuition, and embodied knowledge alongside more traditional scholarly methods. It is here then that I employed A/R/Tography as a rich theoretical lens and analytical framework for ‘situating, locating, and positioning’ myself in research by *becoming A/R/Tography*.

Becoming A/R/Tography

Irwin (2013) proposed the concept of *Becoming A/R/Tography*, which encapsulates the idea of researchers embodying roles as artists, researchers, and educators throughout their research journey. This framework offers a profound theoretical lens through which to examine positions by emphasizing the dynamic and evolving nature of researchers’ identities and practices. By becoming A/R/Tography, researchers can cultivate reflexivity and enrich their understanding of the complexities inherent in educational research. A/r/t as a term is developed purposefully to include the ‘/’. The ‘/’ is used to present equality and interplay between the three identities that place the positionality of the researcher in research – artist/researcher/teacher. Here, it anticipates aesthetic inquiry as one moves from one role to another, learning through the uniqueness of each role in interaction with the research undertaken in their given context (Mohammed 2018). What follows now is my ‘becoming a/r/tography’, using images and words to bring forth the visibility of my positionality.

The visibility of positionality

My doctoral studies have used visual methods to generate photographic and video data on the performative artmaking of early years practitioners. I decided to explore my own positionality in the raw data by focusing on images and clips that could represent aspects of my identity, social location, and subjective experiences. The goal was to develop an awareness of where I stand in relation to the participants which involved experimenting with visual materials to illustrate researcher positionality. This approach, often referred to as the researcher’s gaze, allowed for a deeper understanding of how my perspectives and biases could influence my work.

Through the process of *becoming a/r/tography*, I aimed to engage in reflective practice that not only clarified my positionality but also prioritized participant voice and co-creation of knowledge, where I strived to create a more empowering and collaborative research environment. Video and photographic materials provided unique insights into the phenomena under investigation by offering tangible expressions of researcher positionality and the contexts in which they operate. It allowed me to externalize my internal perspectives, sparking critical reflection on how I influence the research process, hopefully then supporting this in written form.

Examining my role through the lens of *becoming A/R/Tography* and visual materials fostered a thematic analysis that highlighted the power dynamics within the research process. This analysis revealed the complexities of being A/R/T, the challenges of navigating the identities, becoming playful as a position in research, the power of the gaze, the influence that participants’ positions had on my own, and the ethics of participant

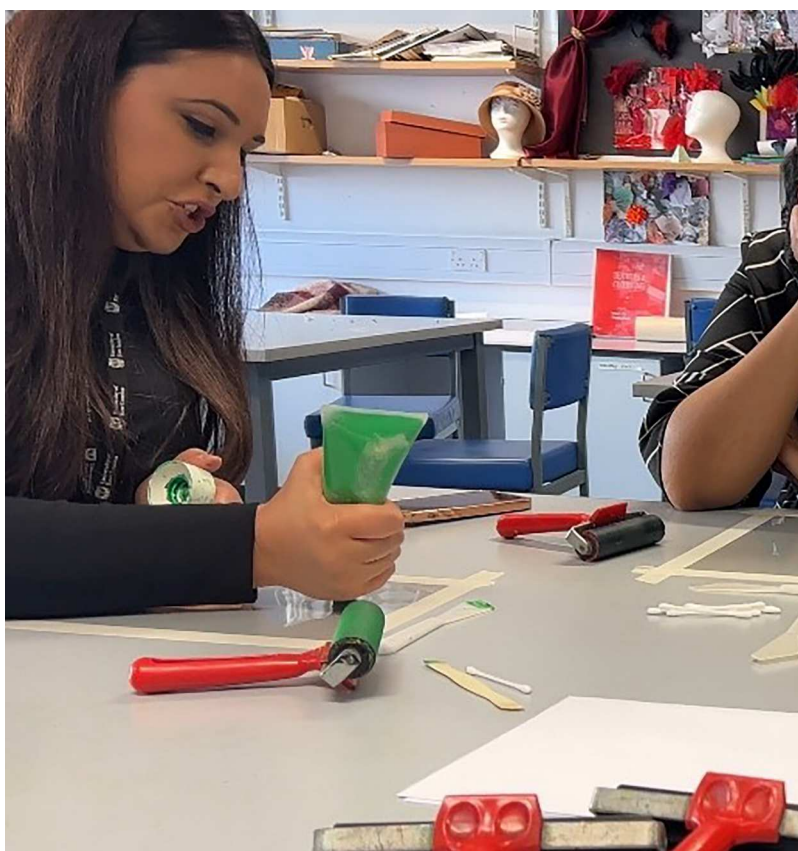


Figure 1. Being Artist.

representation. By scrutinizing raw materials, I was able to uncover hidden dynamics, challenge preconceived notions, and gain a deeper understanding of the research landscape. This visual analysis enriched the data by revealing additional layers of meaning, strengthening its validity and depth, and ultimately contributing to more robust knowledge creation.

Locating positionality: being A/R/T

Figures 1–12 illustrate my becoming a/r/tography. By ‘locating’ a positioning in the images, these visual mediums revealed aspects of my lived experiences as a researcher that may otherwise have remained hidden because locating a positioning in images tells us as much about the photographer as it does about the subject under investigation. In contrast to the philosophy of a/r/tography, where the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher are viewed as interconnected and fluid, my approach illustrated how these roles can also intersect and diverge, revealing different facets of my involvement in the research process. The images and videos with participants highlighted how each role – artist, researcher, and teacher – uniquely contributed to the depth and richness of the experience, but also how these roles can present challenges when blended together.



Figure 2. Being Artist.

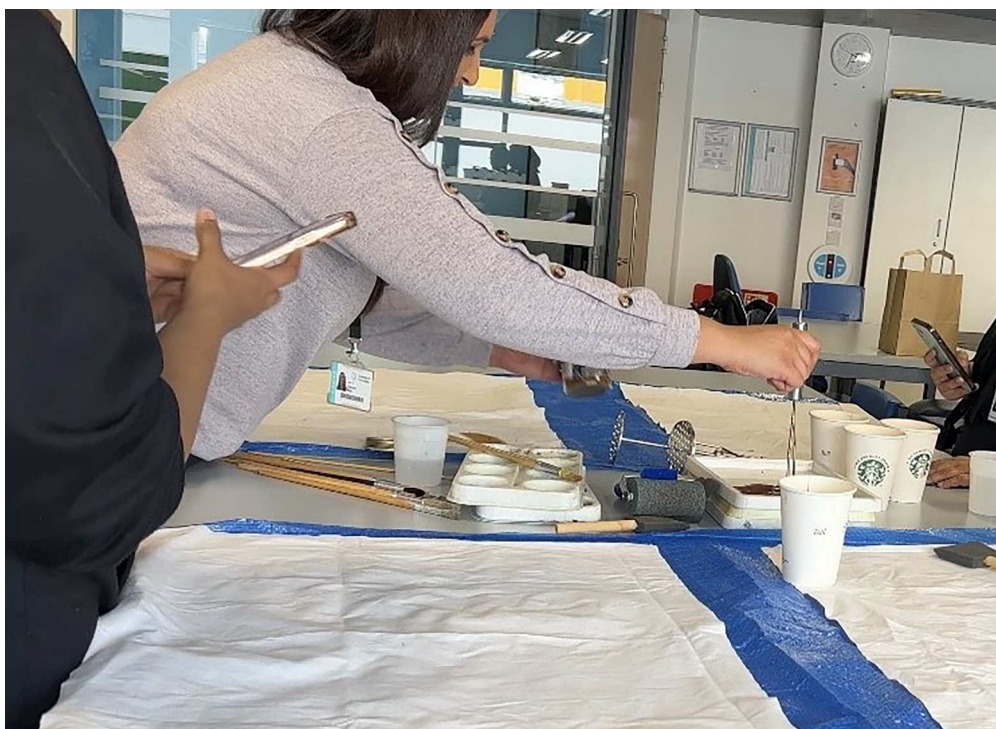


Figure 3. Being Artist.



Figure 4. Being Artist.

As an *artist*, my positionality was one of influence and creation. I shaped the artistic process, guiding participants through creative exercises while allowing them the freedom to explore their own artistic visions. This collaborative environment fostered mutual respect and innovation but also made it clear that my role as the artist carried a certain authority. My aesthetic choices, conceptual framework, and technical expertise were embedded in the work, giving me the power to direct the creative process. Yet, this also raised the question of whether my influence overshadowed the participants' autonomy, which required a delicate balance between guiding and imposing. As an artist, my positionality emphasized the power dynamics at play in the creative process and the importance of recognizing how my artistic vision shaped the work.

In my role as a *researcher*, my positionality shifted to one of observation and analysis. By stepping back and documenting the unfolding of phenomena, I aimed to approach the research with objectivity and detachment. However, I was acutely aware that my presence



Figure 5. Being Researcher.

still influenced the participants and their actions. This tension raised questions about how my role as a researcher shaped the research questions, methods, and interpretations. Despite striving for objectivity, my personal experiences, biases, and worldview inevitably influenced the data I was collecting and interpreting. This role required constant reflexivity, recognizing that no research is ever truly neutral. My positionality as a researcher emphasized the need for self-awareness and reflection on how my identity shaped my observations and interpretations.

As a *teacher*, my positionality was one of authority and guidance. I imparted knowledge, techniques, and skills to the participants, positioning myself as an expert responsible for shaping their learning experience. While this hierarchical dynamic provided clarity and structure, it also required me to consider the balance between offering expertise and fostering a collaborative learning environment. As a teacher, I had to be mindful of how I framed my knowledge to avoid imposing my own perspectives on the participants. My role was not just about imparting knowledge but facilitating an environment where participants could take ownership of their learning and creative processes.

Taken together, these shifting roles highlighted the dynamic and multifaceted nature of positionality in research. Rather than being a static concept, positionality is ‘fluid’ (Schulz 2021), changing depending on the context and the role one occupies. The being artist, researcher, and teacher identities revealed the complexities inherent in understanding

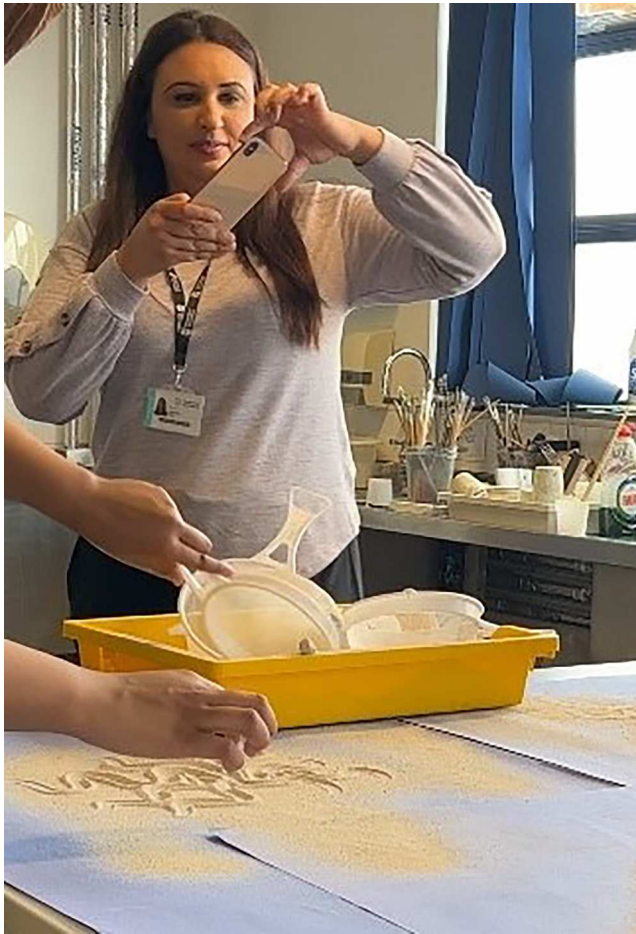


Figure 6. Being Researcher.

how our social, cultural, and personal identities shape our involvement in research. Each role offered unique contributions to the research process but also raised important ethical considerations and challenges. As an artist, my role empowered creativity yet also carried risks of over-influence; as a researcher, my detachment allowed for objective observation, but my presence still shaped the phenomena; as a teacher, my expertise guided the participants but also created a power dynamic that needed careful navigation.

Ultimately, these reflections on my roles underscore the importance of a nuanced and reflexive approach to understanding positionality. Rather than seeing researchers as neutral observers or creators, we must recognize the fluidity of our identities and how these influence our interactions and intersect with participants and the knowledge produced.

Navigating becoming an artist, teacher, and researcher

While becoming A/R/Tography offered a unique lens for exploring positionality, it presented a particular challenge for those who, like me, wear multiple hats. The ability to tap into artistic and pedagogical expertise can easily lead to a tug-of-war between these roles and the core responsibility of being a researcher. This tension arises from the inherent



Figure 7. Being Researcher.



Figure 8. Being Researcher.



Figure 9. Being Teacher.

conflict between creative expression and analytical rigor, ultimately influencing one's positionality within the research. My position as a researcher was in constant flux as I navigated the multifaceted nature of A/R/T. Often, I found myself gravitating toward the more familiar territory of artist and teacher, sometimes at the expense of the researcher's critical gaze. This blurring of lines highlights the complexities of researcher positionality when employing an A/R/Tographical lens, because our preexisting identities and professional backgrounds can influence how we approach research, potentially leading us to prioritize certain aspects (like artistic expression or fostering a positive learning environment) over the research objectives.

One instance exemplifies this. Captivated by the interplay of light and shadow in the studio space, I became fixated on capturing a specific image. The resulting photograph was undoubtedly evocative, but upon reflection, it lacked any details needed to explore the learning interactions central to my research question. This experience served as a reminder of how my many identities can influence my positionality, potentially shifting my focus away from the research goals. Similarly, my teacherly instincts took over, leading me to provide impromptu guidance or clarification, which could influence participant behavior and ultimately skew the research data. Here, my positionality as an educator directly impacts my role as a researcher, highlighting the need for constant objectivity, vigilance, and reflexivity.

One approach I found helpful was keeping a detailed research journal as a space to document my decisions, analyze how these choices might influence participant representation (and my own positionality), and ensure they aligned with the research questions.



Figure 10. Being Teacher.

Furthermore, after viewing the raw images, I made a conscious effort to separate my artistic and educational impulses from the research process. For example, when facilitating activities, I focused on facilitating participant narratives and interpretations of their chosen art mediums, rather than my own artistic knowledge and responses.

While this balancing act can be challenging, it ultimately enriches the research too. By embracing the perspectives of artist, teacher, and researcher, I gained a more holistic understanding of the research context. However, this richness demanded careful navigation. The artistic and educational aspects should inform and enrich the research questions, not replace the critical analysis. This experience underscored the importance of consciously merging these identities while remaining grounded in the core researcher role. Effective navigation of this tightrope walk is crucial for producing well-rounded, impactful research that not only contributes to the field but leverages the strengths of



Figure 11. Being Teacher.



Figure 12. Being Teacher.

these interconnected professional roles, all while maintaining a critically reflective approach to our positionality within the research process.

Therefore, the modality of positionality becomes evident through these reflections, demonstrating that positionality is multifaceted and dynamic. It is influenced by various factors, including the context of the research, the methods employed, and the personal backgrounds and perspectives of both the researcher and participants (Yip 2023). Recognizing this, I have come to appreciate the complexity of positionality and the importance of remaining reflexive and aware of how my own visible position influences the research process and outcomes. Through this engaged reflexivity, I can better navigate the ethical and methodological challenges that arise, ensuring a more authentic and respectful engagement with participants.

Becoming playful

In addition to my positions as artist, researcher, and teacher, there was also the aspect of me *becoming playful* within the research context. This role of playfulness served as a significant and dynamic layer to my overall positionality. As a playful participant in the research, I engaged in the process not only with intentionality and structure but also with an openness to spontaneity, creativity, and curiosity (Brown and Leigh 2019). Playfulness allowed for a sense of freedom and fluidity, breaking down rigid boundaries between the roles I occupied. It invited a more experimental, joyful approach to both the artistic and research processes, encouraging unexpected discoveries and moments of connection with the participants (Figures 13 and 14).

By embodying playfulness, I created a space for participants to feel more relaxed and open, which fostered a sense of mutual exploration. I found my being playful disrupted traditional power dynamics, allowing both myself and the participants to approach the research with a sense of wonder and discovery, rather than simply adhering to formal structures (James 2021). This sense of play allowed for a deeper engagement with the participants, inviting them to explore, make mistakes, and take creative risks without fear of judgment. It also helped me navigate the complexities of blending the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher, as it emphasized the importance of interaction, joy, and curiosity in shaping the research environment.

Playfulness, then, became another vital layer of positionality – one that emphasized the importance of embracing the unplanned, the whimsical, and the joyfully uncertain aspects of the research journey. However, being playful does raise ethical considerations, which require sensitivity to ensure participants feel safe and respected in open, exploratory environments (Burke et al. 2024). There is a fine balance between creating an open, free-flowing environment and ensuring that participants feel safe, respected, and fully aware of their role in the research. Playful engagement should never diminish the significance of participants' experiences or trivialize sensitive topics. However, a playful stance can influence data interpretation, encouraging alternative, more dynamic ways of making sense of information through movement, metaphor, and artistic expression (Brown and Leigh 2019). Being playful then challenges the boundaries of traditional research, demonstrating that playfulness is not just an act of leisure but a powerful methodological tool that fosters deeper engagement, ethical reflexivity, and transformative insight which one can explore going forward.



Figure 13. Being Playful.

The power of the gaze

The visibility of the researcher plays a crucial role in shaping power dynamics. As a researcher, wielding a camera represented an authority figure, which potentially led to altered behavior in performative artmaking for the camera. For instance, in several video clips, participants initially appeared hesitant or guarded when I positioned myself directly in front of them with the camera. Their body language, such as crossed arms and averted gazes, suggested a sense of discomfort with being observed and filmed. This highlighted the power dynamics inherent in the act of observation, where the researcher holds the camera, a tool that can feel intrusive as in [Figures 15 and 16](#).



Figure 14. Being Playful.

The act of standing back and observing itself carried nuanced power dynamics (Figure 17). Looking over a participant's shoulder can create discomfort, highlighting the inherent power imbalance (Figure 18). Furthermore, taking photos and videos grants the researcher significant power to frame and influence participants' portrayal, shaping how they are perceived by both the researcher and the audience. It is here where 'relations of power operate in the research process' (Reid, Greaves, and Kirby 2017, 50) and affect the researcher's relationship with, and perspective of, not only the participants but the phenomena under investigation.

Images and videos revealed subtle biases and blind spots in my approach. For instance, the framing of a photo privileged my perspective over that of the participants (Figure 19). This challenges the researcher's sole control over representation and fosters a more nuanced understanding of the research context. It is here then that our 'gaze' actively



Figure 15. Wielding Camera.

shapes what we document and how we interpret it. This raises ethical considerations about representation and highlights the importance of ensuring informed consent and respectful representation. A point discussed later in this article. It also was about adapting my approach to maintain a balance of power and encourage genuine participation. Group discussions with participants assisted with this as it helped me understand how my presence influences the research environment.

Participant influence on positionality

Although a researcher's situated position is a crucial aspect of research, it is not static, but rather a dynamic dance influenced by interactions with the participants (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019). This bidirectional influence, often overlooked, became particularly evident through examining the visual data in my research. The images and videos captured the fluidity of the research process as both I, the researcher, and the participants, continuously negotiated our positions in relation to each other. For instance, as familiarity increased with repeated interactions, a noticeable shift occurred.

Later video clips revealed participants displaying greater comfort, even directly engaging with the camera at times. This manifested in relaxed postures, smiles, or even playful

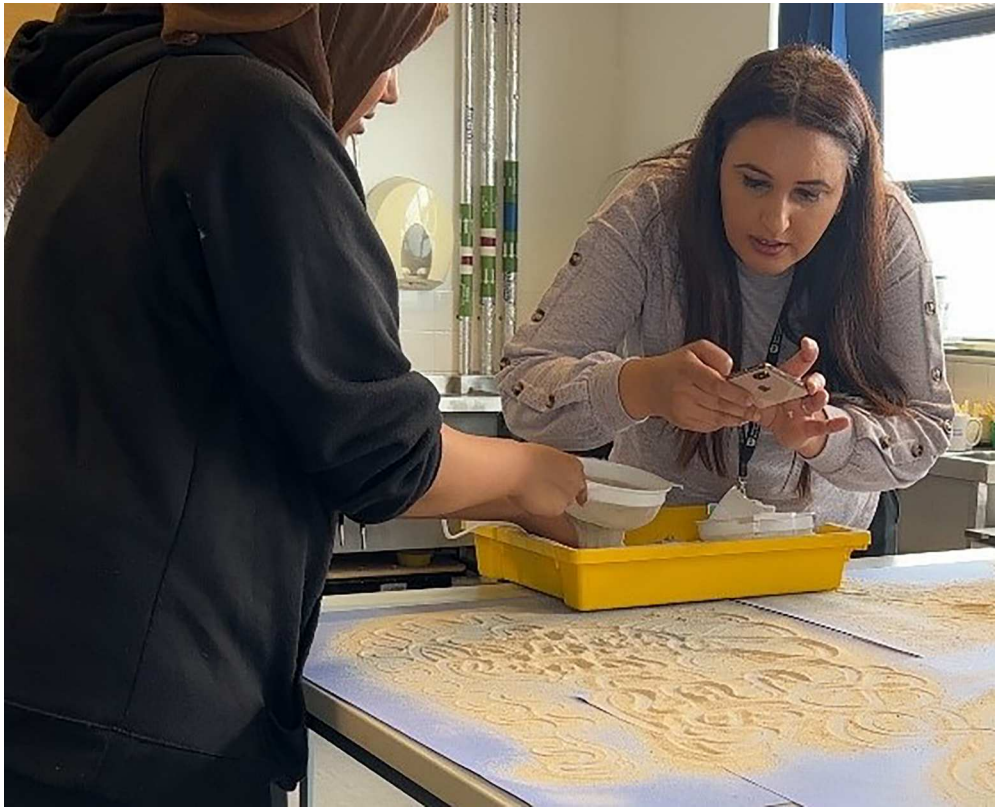


Figure 16. Welding Camera.

gestures compared to earlier recordings where participants appeared more hesitant, with closed body language or averted gazes. Additionally, some participants who initially spoke in hushed tones later adopted a more conversational style, even using humor or personal anecdotes. Further, participants felt empowered to take their own images throughout the workshops (Figure 20). These all suggest a co-creation of the research space, where participants became more accustomed to my presence and potentially utilized the camera as a platform for self-expression.

My own positionality also influenced the participants' behavior. For instance, from an authority figure at the beginning, I became a friendly, playful, observer. The analysis of body language and camera engagement in the visual data underscores the context-dependent and ever-evolving nature of positionality. Further examples of this dynamic were seen in how my research questions evolved. As participants felt more comfortable sharing their experiences, they introduced new themes or perspectives in the visuals not initially considered. For instance, one participant's drawing depicted a feeling of isolation as an early years practitioner that had not been a central focus in my initial research plan. This led to a shift in the focus of the research, from exploring practitioner's art experiences to also examining feelings of isolation within that community. This demonstrates how the participants' positionality shapes the research agenda and in turn my own position. Their lived experiences informed the research questions and ultimately enriched the project.



Figure 17. Standing back.

The ethics of representation

A key consideration when using visual methods in research, particularly in the context of A/R/Tography, is the ethical implications surrounding data collection, participant representation, and the power dynamics inherent in these processes. The use of images and videos goes beyond the traditional written or spoken word, allowing for a rich, multi-faceted portrayal of participants. However, it also brings forth significant ethical questions regarding consent, privacy, and the potential for misrepresentation.

The process of obtaining informed consent in visual research is not merely a formal requirement but a deeply ethical responsibility (Harley and Langdon 2018; Warr et al. 2016). Unlike written data, images and videos carry a tangible, often intimate representation of a person, which can be reexamined, re-contextualized, and interpreted in ways that participants might not have anticipated. It is essential that participants understand, and it is made transparent to them, that not only how the data will be collected but also how it will be used, stored, and shared (Rossi and Lenzini 2020). This understanding must extend to the nuances of how visual data may carry different meanings in



Figure 18. Looking over.

various contexts and the potential for unintended consequences. For instance, the interpretation of images can vary widely depending on cultural, social, or personal contexts (Wiles et al. 2008), and researchers must ensure that participants are fully aware of these possibilities before giving consent.

Moreover, it is important to ensure that consent is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. As the research unfolds, the nature of the data collected may evolve, and new uses for the visual material might emerge. Continuous communication with participants about these changes is essential, ensuring that they remain comfortable with how their likenesses or stories are being represented. Researchers should create spaces for participants to withdraw consent if they feel uncomfortable with how the visual data is being used, demonstrating respect for their agency and autonomy throughout the research process.

In addition to consent, a critical aspect of ethical practice in visual data collection is the power dynamics involved in capturing and representing participants. Visual methods inherently carry a power imbalance due to the act of taking control over how individuals are portrayed (Packard 2008). As researchers, we must be aware of the



Figure 19. Framing Photos.

ways in which our positioning – both in relation to our participants and within the broader context of the research – shapes the images we capture. The lens through which we document participants is inherently subjective and influenced by our own biases, assumptions, and perspectives or as Kalu (2019, 97) notes as ‘subjective is’ in what a researcher brings to the research. ‘Framing’ participants not only reflects our position as researchers but also involves power dynamics related to how individuals are perceived, represented, and ultimately understood by others.

For example, in my own research, the images and videos I collected were not neutral; they were shaped by my aesthetic choices, my research questions, and the context in which the data was collected. The participants, despite being active contributors to the creative process, were ultimately framed through my perspective as the researcher. This raised important questions about the ethical responsibility to present participants not as passive subjects but as co-creators whose voices, identities, and experiences should be treated with dignity and respect. Power is not only inherent in the act of creating visual data, but also in how it is interpreted and disseminated, potentially reinforcing or challenging existing social, cultural, or political structures (Kaaristo 2022).

One way to mitigate these power dynamics was through participatory approaches to visual data collection, where participants have an active role in how they are portrayed (Mitchell, De Lange, and Molestane 2017). For example, researchers can involve participants in the process of selecting or editing images, allowing them to have a say in how



Figure 20. Participant positionality.

their stories are represented. In some of the images within this article, participants wanted their faces blurred in some photos and not in others. This participatory model can help to democratize the research process, ensuring that participants' voices are not overshadowed by the researcher's own framing of the data.

Ethical representation of participants in visual research also requires constant reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Wiles et al. 2008). This reflexivity involves being mindful of how our positionality – our cultural, social, and personal identities – shapes the way we collect, interpret, and present visual data. We must continually ask ourselves whether we are truly representing participants in ways that honor their complexity and agency, or whether we are imposing our own interpretations and assumptions onto them. This process of ethical reflection can help ensure that participants are not reduced to stereotypes or simplistic portrayals but are instead represented as multi-faceted individuals with their own narratives and identities.

Furthermore, ethical reflexivity also involves recognizing the potential harms that visual representation can cause. Images and videos are powerful tools, but they can also be intrusive, particularly when they capture sensitive or vulnerable moments. Researchers must consider the potential psychological, social, or cultural impact of these representations on participants. Ensuring that the research does not exploit or harm participants – either intentionally or unintentionally – requires constant ethical

vigilance, particularly when working with vulnerable populations or sensitive topics (Gordon 2020).

The act of looking as ways of seeing and knowing

Becoming and being A/R/Tography compels researchers to confront their positionality head-on. Visual materials, far from being mere data collection tools, act as mirrors reflecting the researcher's background and perspectives. These images and videos can unearth hidden assumptions, biases, and even emotions that traditional methods might miss. Barad's (2007) concept of the 'agential cut' underscores this – the act of looking shapes not only what we document but also how we understand ourselves within the research. Examining photographs and videos as ways of seeing and knowing in relation to research positionality provides a time, resource, and cost-effective method for early career researchers and doctoral students to gain immediate access to rich data, enabling them to practice engaged reflexivity (Irwin 2013, 59).

However, this focus on the visual also demands strong visual literacy skills. Researchers must move beyond simply acquiring information and engage in critical analysis, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning within the visuals. This critical engagement allows them to explore how their own gaze shapes the research. Duchak's (2014) concept of 'collective visual illiteracy' highlights the importance of developing these skills. As our world becomes saturated with visual information, critical visual analysis is no longer a luxury, but a necessity and therefore equipping researchers with strong visual skills allows them to move beyond simply capturing visuals to understanding how to use them to represent themselves and their experiences. This deeper understanding brings the visibility of researcher positionality to the fore.

Cultivating visual literacy however, is an ongoing process that requires continuous learning and reflection. To foster a research culture that is not only visually informed but also critically reflective, we can incorporate visual analysis techniques into methodologies, encourage interdisciplinary dialogue around visual representation, and provide targeted training. By embracing the visual, researchers can navigate the complexities of researcher positionality within lenses such as A/R/Tography, leading to richer research experiences, more meaningful interpretations, and ultimately, a deeper understanding of research.

Final thoughts: a personal reflection on becoming A/R/Tography

Reflecting on my journey with A/R/Tography, I find myself reconsidering how deeply intertwined the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher are with my personal experiences and positionality. Rather than simply applying a framework, I've come to see it as a catalyst for transformative change – not just in how I view my role as a researcher, but in how I engage with my participants and understand my own biases. I have explored how visual methods have allowed me to engage with my positionality in ways that go beyond traditional research methods.

The act of visually locating myself through these mediums has revealed new layers of self-awareness and authenticity that might have otherwise remained hidden. By capturing moments in time and reflecting on them, I have seen how my presence influences the

research process, in ways both subtle and overt. This realization has made me question the long-standing expectation in research to be neutral and objective, understanding that our subjectivity is as much a part of the process as is our analysis.

In becoming and being A/R/Tography, I've learned to embrace the fluidity of my roles as an artist, researcher, and teacher, all while acknowledging the complexity and power that comes with each. Pondering these roles and their intersection has given me new insights into how I co-construct knowledge with participants, and how power dynamics naturally emerge in collaborative spaces. It is in this pondering, in the space between intention and action, that the ethical and respectful decisions around participant representation arise.

For those beginning their research journeys, particularly early career researchers and doctoral students, I encourage you to consider the power of visual exploration as a starting point for locating your own positionality. Before writing it out or intellectualizing your place in the research, use visuals to help you feel, see, and experience your role. This practice doesn't just clarify where you stand – it helps you understand how your biases and experiences might shape every step of the research process. Through visual reflection, you begin to not only *acknowledge* your positionality but also *understand* it in a much deeper, and more personal way.

Ultimately, what I've come to realize is that positionality isn't just something to be understood – it's something to be lived, felt, and explored. Visuals have encouraged me to transform the way I see my place in the research process, and, in doing so, it has helped me cultivate a research practice that is more empathetic, more reflective, and, ultimately, more meaningful. The reflective practice of pondering, for me, is the key – it allows for the weaving of personal insights into the fabric of the research, creating outcomes that are richer, more insightful, and more attuned to the complexities of the world we study. Through this journey of becoming, I see that A/R/Tography is not just a lens, but a path toward deeper self-awareness and transformative change in educational research.

Ethical approval and consent

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of East London (UEL) Research Ethics Committee as part of the author's doctoral studies. The study adhered to the university's ethical guidelines, ensuring that all research activities were conducted with integrity, transparency, and respect for participants' rights and well-being.

All participants provided informed consent before engaging in the study. They were given detailed information sheets outlining the research aims, methods, potential risks, and how their data would be used. Consent was obtained through signed consent forms, with participants given the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Additionally, for visual data such as photographs and videos, participants provided specific consent regarding how their images could be used in research outputs, including academic publications, presentations, and exhibitions.

The data collected, including visual and textual materials, will contribute to various research outputs while maintaining ethical safeguards, such as anonymization where necessary and adherence to data protection protocols. This ensures that participants' rights, dignity, and autonomy remain central throughout the dissemination process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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