Expanding Definitions of Research:

Sites of knowledge beyond the university turnstiles.

An Action Research Project by Rosa-Johan Uddoh

The Professional Context

- bell hooks describes how, in the 80s and 90s, white women and men academics formed alliances 'to formulate and impose standards of critical evaluation that would be used to define what is theoretical and what is not. These standards often led to appropriation and/ or devaluation of work that did not "fit," that was suddenly deemed not theoretical – or not theoretical enough' (hooks, 1993).

- There was a 'turning away of white feminist scholars from fully respecting and valuing the critical insights and theoretical insights of black women or women of color': a cementing of 'intellectual elitism' (hooks, 1993).
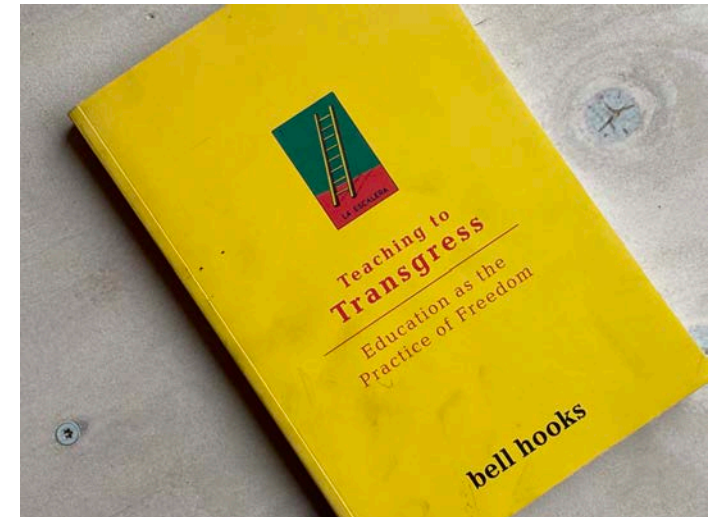
The Professional Context

- In my time as a student and teacher, I've found that the same problems persist 50 years later: students rarely cite black academics and revert to traditional forms of research, and are rarely empowered to use autoethnographic, indigenous or experimental methods, especially when it comes to their dissertations.

- For Inclusive Practices, I explored the psychological impact of a hegemonic white and middle-class learning environment on black students and teachers. There is still only one black woman lecturer in the Performance department (its me!) and each year, black students are non-existent or in the extreme minority (Uddoh, 2023).

- UAL agrees theres a need to decolonise and, indirectly, 'intellectual elitism' (hooks, 1993) as an ongoing problem: last year, UAL had an 11% attainment gap between white and Black students (UAL, 2022).

For three years I have worked in the Performance department at a university. In my practice, I think about the roles we perform. When I think about considering, really considering the question 'Can I live?' in the context of a university, I think of the Black students I've encountered in my time in institutions. Across elite universities in the UK, these are the minority. Many Black students struggle with getting their deeply felt ideas understood by their peers, are subject to overtly harsh critique, isolated from their peers and tutors, struggling to make friends, find collaborators. Tragically, a Black student on another course in my department committed suicide in 2019. At the inquest, his mother cited the racist abuse he suffered at the university as a contributing factor.[10] All these things remind me: 'attendance' in all its meanings – caring for, paying attention to, turning up, remaining here, coming to the class, registration – is difficult.

These experiences I see remind me of my own experience as an undergraduate at another 'elite' institution. Where I tried to make friends, to communicate my ideas, campaign and organise around the huge lack of diversity, but by my final year I was so stressed about my social situation that the fear that people were looking at me confined me to my bedroom. This fear left me unable to go to the library or to submit my portfolio. It would be white to say this was paranoia. In fact, while they couldn't admit that there was a lack of Black students, the admissions tutor did refer me to the college psychologist (something I didn't take up). And of course, people *were* looking at me, as people often do, when there is only one Black girl in a class of 30 or a college of 1500.

Sharpe describes an encounter when she was a student on her postgraduate programme:

'There have been many protests, many meetings, many demands for curricular and other changes, yet [my teacher] asks, in apparent sincerity: "Why are you so unhappy? Why are the Black students so unhappy here?"

I respond: "Ask the white students why they are so happy. In their replies lie the answers to your question."
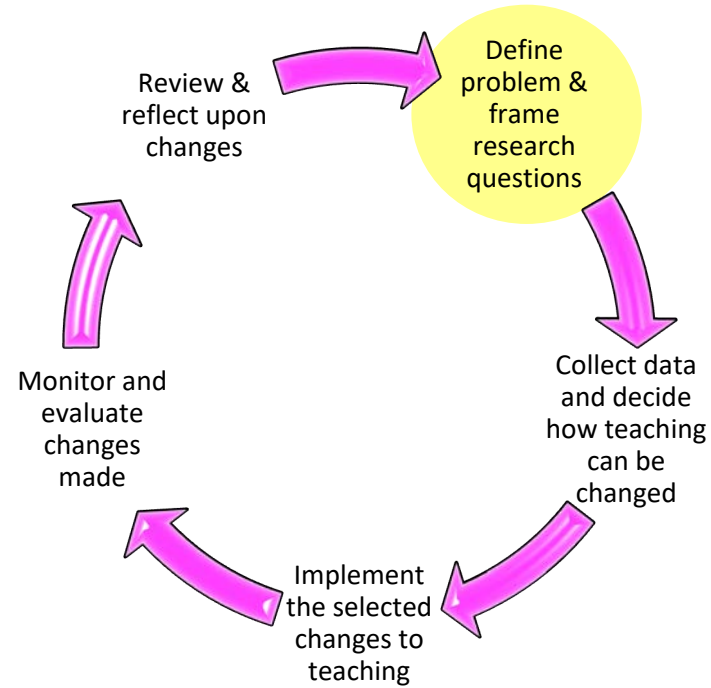
Such things happen too many times to recount.'[11]

According to the university workers union, UCU, in the UK university sector there is currently a 17% pay gap between Black and white teachers.[12] Most Black people I regularly encounter in the university are cleaners on insecure contracts.[13] Black lecturers are often on insecure contracts. Sometimes white students complain that they can't relate to the content I teach. This summer, a UK university announced the shock decision to cut a postgraduate course in the History of Africa and African Diaspora, referencing a lack of student recruitment. At the same time it proposes to make the professor who ran the course, the first British African to become a professor in the UK, redundant.[14] Sometimes your attendance is not marked down, registered, renumerated or valued. Sometimes you want to attend, but are barred from doing so.

Untitled (Woman playing Solitaire), Carrie Mae Weems, 1990.

'Some things I remember but they no longer live on the surface of my days.'[15]
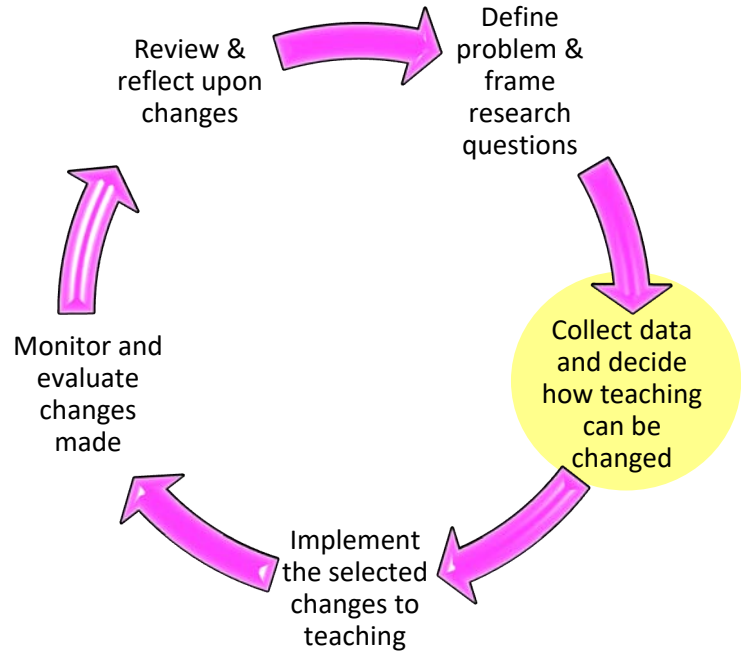
I did get out of my undergrad bedroom, with the help of a professor who offered to come to my door and help me carry my portfolio to the

Pages from 'Registration', an article I published with Montez Press, 2023, based on writing begun during the IP Unit.

Research Questions

Define problem & frame research questions

Collect data and decide how teaching can be changed

Implement the selected changes to teaching

Monitor and evaluate changes made

Review & reflect upon changes

- 'What do Stage 1 Performance: Design and Practice students classify as 'research' at the beginning of their undergraduate degree?'

- 'How can student definitions of 'research' be expanded beyond limited Western, imperial definitions of 'research', through my own teaching interventions?'

- Through my interventions, I wanted to challenge any false distinction between theory and practice (hooks, 1993), instead to encourage a symbiotic relationship between students' university life and life beyond the uni. Rather than somewhere where 'intellectual elitism' is cemented or reverted to, I wanted to teach 'researching' as a space for the practice of freedom (hooks, 1993), and a tool for making a difference in people's lives.

Review & reflect upon changes → Define problem & frame research questions → Collect data and decide how teaching can be changed → Implement the selected changes to teaching → Monitor and evaluate changes made → (cycle)

Collecting Initial Data: Data Point A

- In class I asked the students two questions: **'What is Research?'** and then **'How does research take place?'**

- I asked students to write down their answers on a piece of paper and put it in a hat. Students then took an answer that wasn't their own, read it aloud and spoke about whether they agreed, disagreed or would add anything to it.

- Collecting a mixture of types of data – written, drawn and oral, would allow me to maximise student contributions, as students could respond in the way they felt most comfortable.

- The questions were kept open to allow for a variety of themes to emerge, led by students.

Research is the comprehensive collection of information surrounding a chosen topic in preparation of carrying out a particular project.

art and media that we consume* to inform our own practice.

* and analyse

Research is collecting further knowledge on a topic /subject and refining accurate information.

get a further information of the background. with test, history. culture, and the process of observation.

Observing the world Actively want to dig

what is research?
- The exploration of information weather past /historical or new.
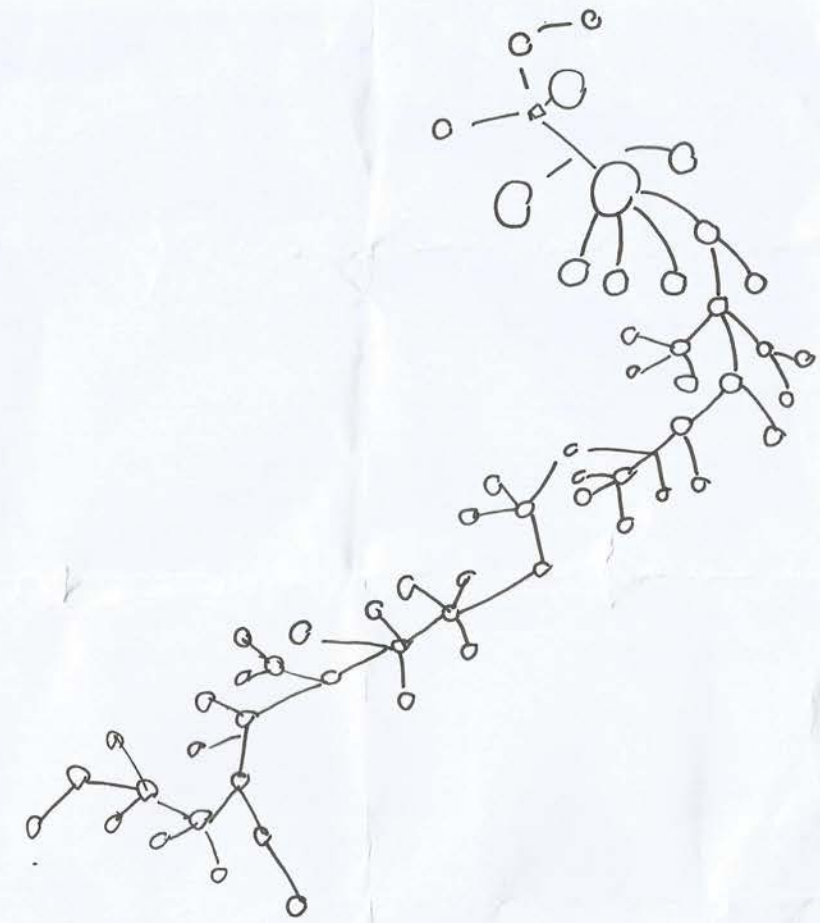
'How does research take place?'

primary research sources → locations, experimentation
(site visits.
secondary research sources
↳ interviews ↳ films
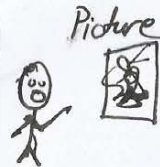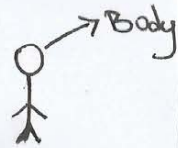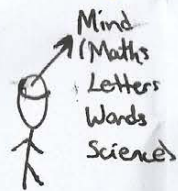↳ articles
↳ videos

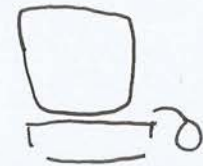based on ↳ background.
Someone's ↳ history
↳ knowledge
↳ characteristics.

primary / secondary

Other people's discussion / opinions

Anywhere and Anytime

Mind
(Maths
Letters
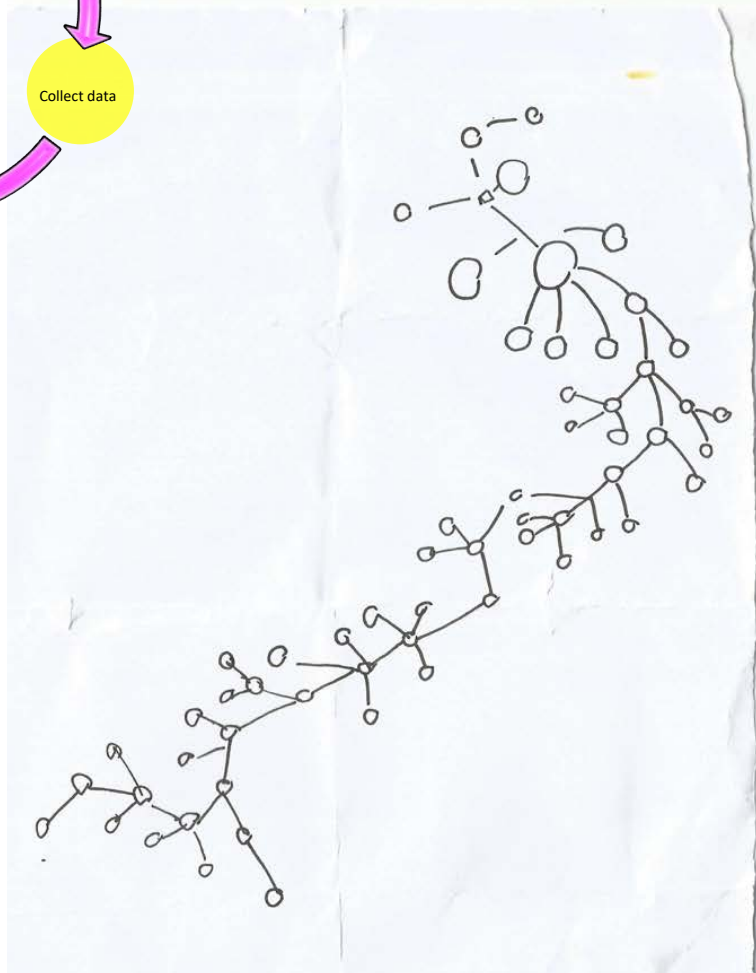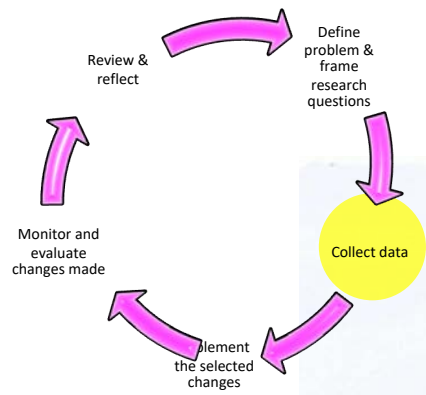Words
Science)

→ Body

Picture

PROCESSING

+ Gallery
library

Research can be collected either from past findings
or personal experiences within scenarios.

Methodologies

Define problem & frame research questions

Review & reflect

Collect data

Monitor and evaluate changes made

Implement the selected changes

- To analyse this initial data, I used a combination of autoethnographic, thematic and textual analysis. I would continue to use this throughout the project.

- By using three different methods of analysis to look at the data, I was able to partially overcome the limitations of each method, supplementing it with the other in a holistic approach.

Data Point A: Analysis
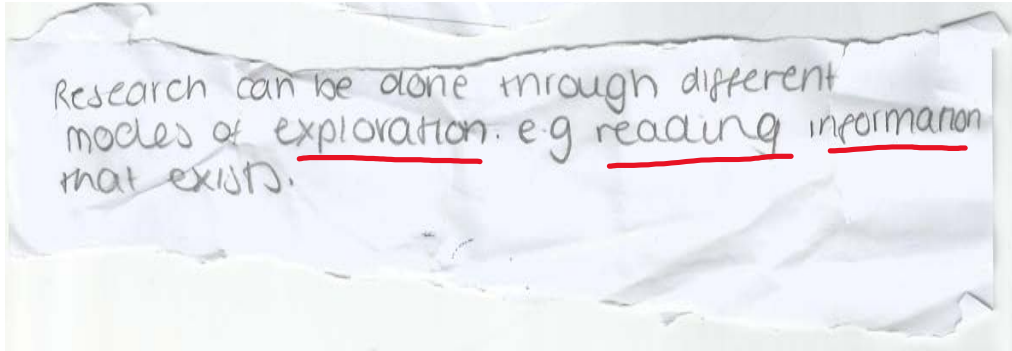
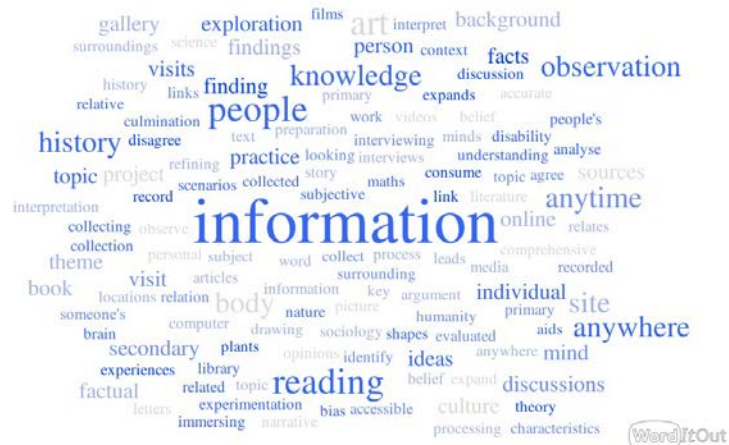*Above: A typical response touching on 3 of the most popular themes identified in textual-thematic analysis. Red underlines my own.*

Most students say that research is about obtaining 'information' or 'knowledge', referred to research as a kind of journey and referred to reading.

Left: A word cloud generated from crude textual analysis of responses.

Below: The word 'ART' crossed out, but still submitted. This was a response that sparked a lot of discussion

Both textual and visual sources were frequently referenced. However, visual sources were more contentious – it was questioned whether this was really a valid form of research. E.g. someone submitted a piece of paper which said ART, crossed, which became a talking point among students. This made the word appear more frequently in text analysis. Comparatively, textual sources were more widely mentioned, but their legitimacy never questioned. I wondered whether if we were not in a gallery at the time, whether art would've been mentioned at all.

- There is a disconnect between the students' practices and lives and notions of research.

- Despite this course being a performance course, no students mentioned performances as types of research. The 'body' was referenced three times, but all by the same student.

- More detached ways of talking about research are more prevalent (e.g. observation based), rather than emotional or embodied.

- Even though the students have different backgrounds, and the method used was successful as it meant every student spoke, lots of answers are quite similar – they seem 'text book'?
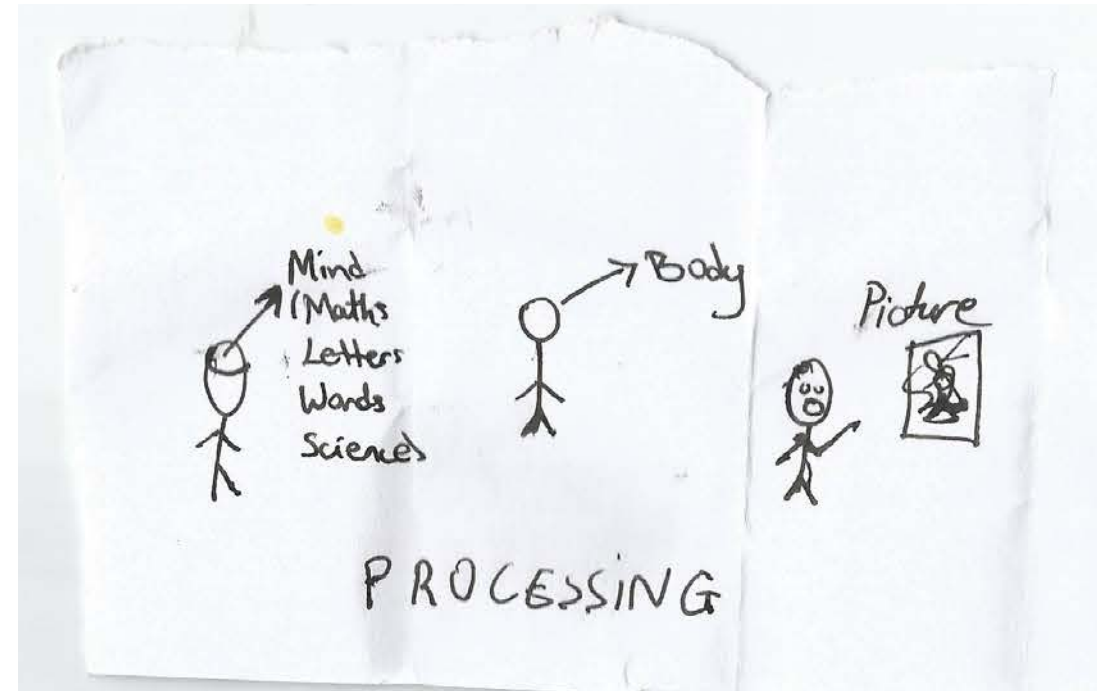
Above: A rare kind-of acknowledgement of research as embodied practice.

Review & reflect upon changes → Define problem & frame research questions → Collect data and decide how teaching can be changed → Implement the selected changes to teaching → Monitor and evaluate changes made →

Interventions
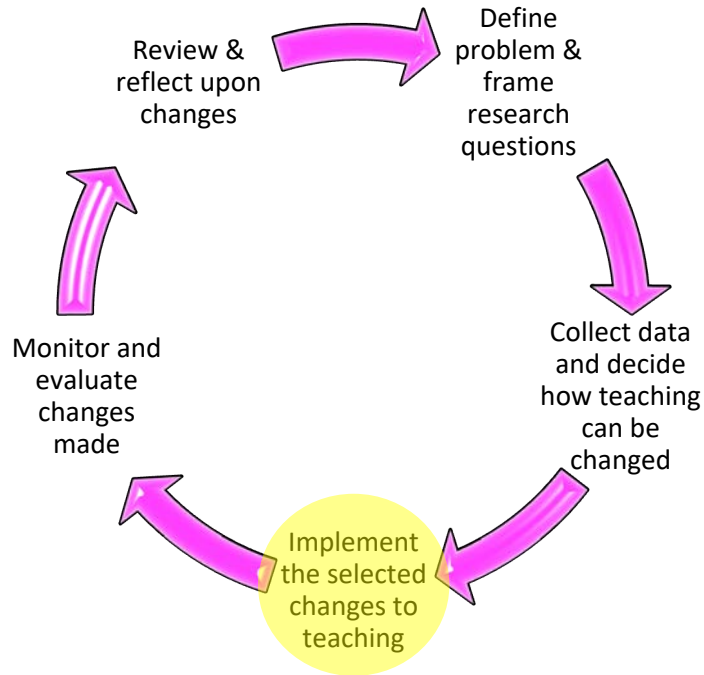
- To take the students on trips outside the university, framing these as 'research trips', followed by a prompt to go on their own research trip.

- Because of the complications of taking students off-site, the two trips I led had to be planned in advance of the first data point, based on secondary data.

Interventions

Oppositional looking in the National Gallery.
How can students use 'white' institutional spaces for their own purposes?

Multi-sensorial grassroots research in Bethnal Green Nature Reserve.
How can students do embodied research outside institutions/ outside?

Interventions

Figure 1 Image of people exploring Bethnal Green Nature Reserve

Research Trips – Methods and Locations

There are many different places you might go to find information on a topic you're interested in, and many methods you might use to find that information.

As part of the Unit 2 project, 'Experiments in Co-creation', you are asked to plan and go on a research trip that is useful to you and what you are trying to make for this project.

- You might decide to go on a research trip independently and feed back your findings to your group, or your group might decide to all go on the same research trip together.
- You should aim to go on this trip ahead of the check-in session on Friday 24th November, where we will be checking in on your progress for this project so far.
- Remember, your final outcome for your performance is Friday 1st December.

Locations

Below are some ideas of places you might go on a research trip, including some of the ones I have taken you on so far.

This is by no means an exhaustive list – you can be creative and expansive with where you choose to go to find the knowledge you need. I have focused on sites in London to keep travel costs down. You may decide to go further afield. All listed are free, except where otherwise stated. If you don't see what you're looking for, ask your tutor.

Large Contemporary Art Galleries

- Tate (Britain, Modern)
- Serpentine Gallery
- The Barbican

- A third intervention, designed in response to the data, was to brief the students to go on a research trip of their own, supported, but not limited to, a directory of various interesting and free/ low cost research sites within London.

- The data showed a lack of confidence in taking ownership of research practices by the students. I hoped this opportunity, and the examples of the previous trips I actually took them on, would empower them to do this.

- As someone educated in the West, and with limited time, I was keen to design an intervention that opened up space for student-led learning not constrained by any lingering colonial attitudes/ personal limitations. Students, from global majority backgrounds for instance might already be using decolonial research methods, but may not see them as research so do not bring them to class discussions or dissertations.

- That said, I was aware that some students did not know London and this could be a barrier for them in identifying research sites that would be genuinely useful to their practices, which is why I made the directory.

- South London Gallery
- Whitechapel Gallery
- ICA
- Camden Arts Centre
- Goldsmiths CCA

Smaller Contemporary Art Galleries (artist-run/ non-commercial)

- **The Showroom**
  A contemporary art space focused on collaborative approaches to cultural production within its locality and beyond. Includes a zine library upstairs!
  https://www.theshowroom.org/
- **The Mosaic Rooms**
  Contemporary culture from the Arab world and beyond.
  https://mosaicrooms.org/
- **Auto Italia**
  A non-profit visual arts institution dedicated to researching, producing and exhibiting work on the intersections of queer studies and social change.
  https://autoitaliasoutheast.org/
- **Southwark Park Galleries**
  Two galleries in a beautiful park setting. Through a locally relevant and internationally significant programme of exhibitions, performances and public engagement, SPG's mission is to connect people using the intersection of art, nature and culture to facilitate meaning and wellbeing across communities.
  https://southwarkparkgalleries.org/
- **Autograph**
  Established in 1988, Autograph's mission is to champion the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight questions of race, representation, human rights and social justice.
  https://autograph.org.uk/
- **Gasworks**
  Gasworks is a non-profit contemporary visual art organisation working at the intersection between UK and international practices and debates.
  https://www.gasworks.org.uk/
- **Studio Voltaire**
  Championing emerging and under-represented artists, we commission and produce exhibitions, collaborative projects, artist development programmes, live events and offsite projects.
  https://studiovoltaire.org/
- **Peer Gallery**
  Not-for-profit free-to access space for contemporary art, located in the neighbourhood of Hoxton in East London. Places artists, young people and local communities at the heart of their internationally recognised programmes of public exhibitions, talks and events and offsite commissions.
  https://www.peeruk.org/
- **Metroland Studios Gallery**
  Art and culture(s) centre working at the intersection of art and community, focused on art-making and production that centres the Brent community.

https://metrolandcultures.com/
- **Turf Projects**
  Croydon's homegrown artist space and the first entirely artist-run contemporary art space in the borough.
  https://turf-projects.com/
- **Chisenhale Gallery**
  Commissions and produces contemporary art, supporting international and UK-based artists to make their most ambitious work to date by pursuing new directions in their practices.
  https://chisenhale.org.uk/
- **Lethaby Gallery**
  Just at the front of CSM, The Lethaby Gallery showcases the work of staff, students and alumni from Central Saint Martins. Through our exhibitions, events, workshops and community engagement programmes, The Lethaby acts as a site of experimentation for emerging creative talent.
  https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/central-saint-martins/whats-on-at-csm/lethaby-gallery

Museums

- **The Wellcome Collection**
- **The Soane Museum**
- **Horniman Museums and Garden**
- **Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)**
- **Design Museum**

Libraries/ Archives

- **MayDay Rooms**
  MayDay Rooms is archive, resource and safe haven for social movements, experimental and marginal cultures and their histories.
  https://maydayrooms.org/
- **Stuart Hall Library**, at Iniva.
  Stuart Hall Library is a specialist library that centres art and theory publications from the Global Majority, African, Asian, Caribbean, Polynesian, Latinx, and Diaspora perspectives.
  https://iniva.org/library/
- **Materials and Products Collection**, at CSM.
  The Materials and Products Collection is a collection of new and innovative materials that represent current trends in design and manufacturing, based on the first floor of the library at CSM!
  https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/central-saint-martins/student-life-at-csm/facilities/materials-and-products-collection
- **The Wiener Holocaust Library**
  The Wiener Holocaust Library is one of the world's leading and most extensive archives on the Holocaust, the Nazi era and genocide.
  https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/
- **The Warburg Iconographic and Photographic Collection**
  Contains around 400,000 analogue photographs of sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints, tapestries, and other forms of imagery.
  https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/photographic-collection
- **Black Cultural Archives**

Black Cultural Archives is an archive and heritage centre in Brixton, London, devoted to the histories of people of African and Caribbean descent in Britain.
  https://blackculturalarchives.org/
- **The Feminist Library**
  A large collection of feminist literature based in London. They are a library and community space and support research, activist and community projects.
  https://feministlibrary.co.uk/
- **The Women's Art Library**, at Goldsmiths.
  WAL collected slides, ephemera and other art documentation from artists and actively documented exhibitions and historical collections to offer a public space to view and experience women's art. Thousands of artists from around the world are represented in some form in this collection.
  https://www.gold.ac.uk/make/

Nature

- **Bethnal Green Nature Reserve**
  https://nomadprojects.org/project/phytology/
- **Horniman Museum and Garden**
  Includes a tropical indoor butterfly house!
- **Kew Gardens**
  (£6 for students)
- **Chelsea Physic Garden**
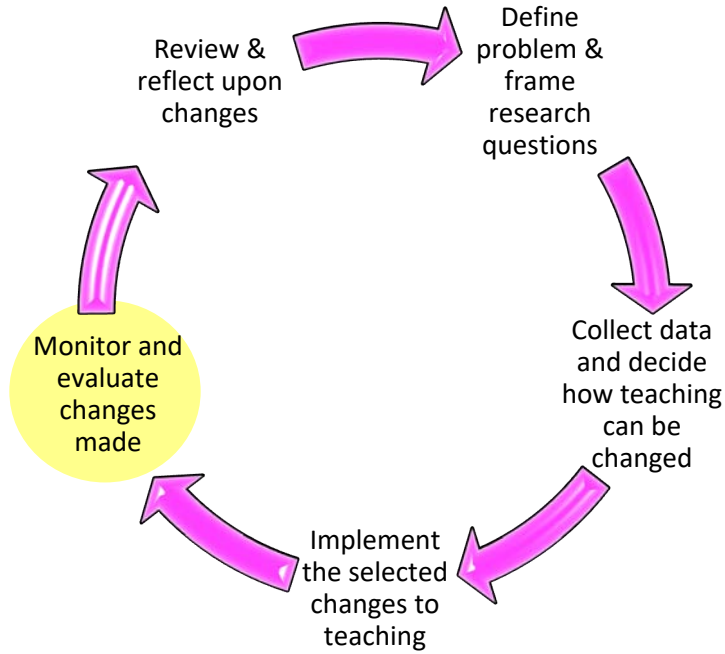 (£6.50 for students)

Of course, there are also more informal locations that your research might take place, like your local park, your grandma's attic, your parents' old VHS collection, or on the street or the beach. Feel free to do your research there too!

Methods

Below are some ideas of methods you might use to collect data at your research site.

- Writing down your reflections
- Blogging/ journalling
- Drawing what you see
- Drawing what you feel
- Interviewing people
- Taking photos
- Making photocopies/ scans of original material
- Taking videos
- Taking voice recordings and transcribing.

Remember, if you plan to take photos, videos or voice recordings of people, or interview people for your research, it is important to get their written consent. More information is here https://www.arts.ac.uk/research/research-standards-and-ethics, but you can also discuss with your tutor.

Data Collection: Point B

Review & reflect upon changes

Define problem & frame research questions

Collect data and decide how teaching can be changed

Implement the selected changes to teaching

Monitor and evaluate changes made

- After the interventions, it was time to collect data to see if and how student definitions had changed. Using the same methods of data collection as before, I asked the students 'How does research take place in your practice?'

- I decided to ask a slightly different question in the hope that it might encourage students more to give specific examples and personal opinions on research rather than 'textbook' answers.

- This did mean the data is less directly comparable with the data I got at Point A, yet on balance I decided that the prompt was similar enough, and that it was more important to give the students a better chance of speaking their minds, than to stick to a 'perfect' test.

How does research take place in your practice?

Dispointent with Tate Morden

RESEARCH IS everything

Observing the world
Actively wanting to dig

Site visits
Interviews
Visuals (Film, Audio)

How does research take place in your practice?

experimenting, documenting my surroundings, mapping out various outcomes

KITA USAYI

1. visit library / galary
2. digital brainstorm
3. search the information / reference

3/10/25

Research

I love research!

Library!

Online thesis databases

↤ the best

Video essays youtube

BFI library goated

instagram poll :)

NOT WIKIPEDIA

It determined the base of the project

① RESEARCH is
LIFE

→ exploring Living
FEELING → Focussing
ON
the details
ZOOMING OUT
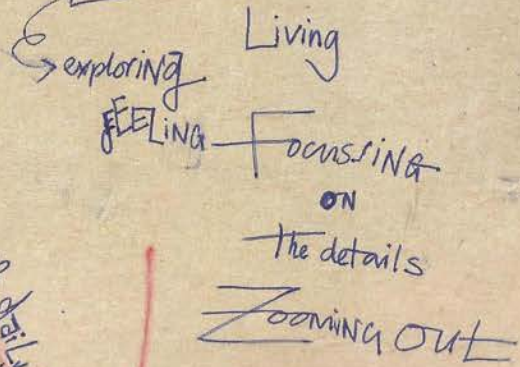
YOUR daily Life and Experience is YOUR Research

You can conduct your own Research.
it doesn't have to be following others.
and CAN be

Paying attention to surroundings, differences + CHANGES.

Philosophical ideas
↓
the idea or experience
from myself
↓
mix them.. Personal → social.
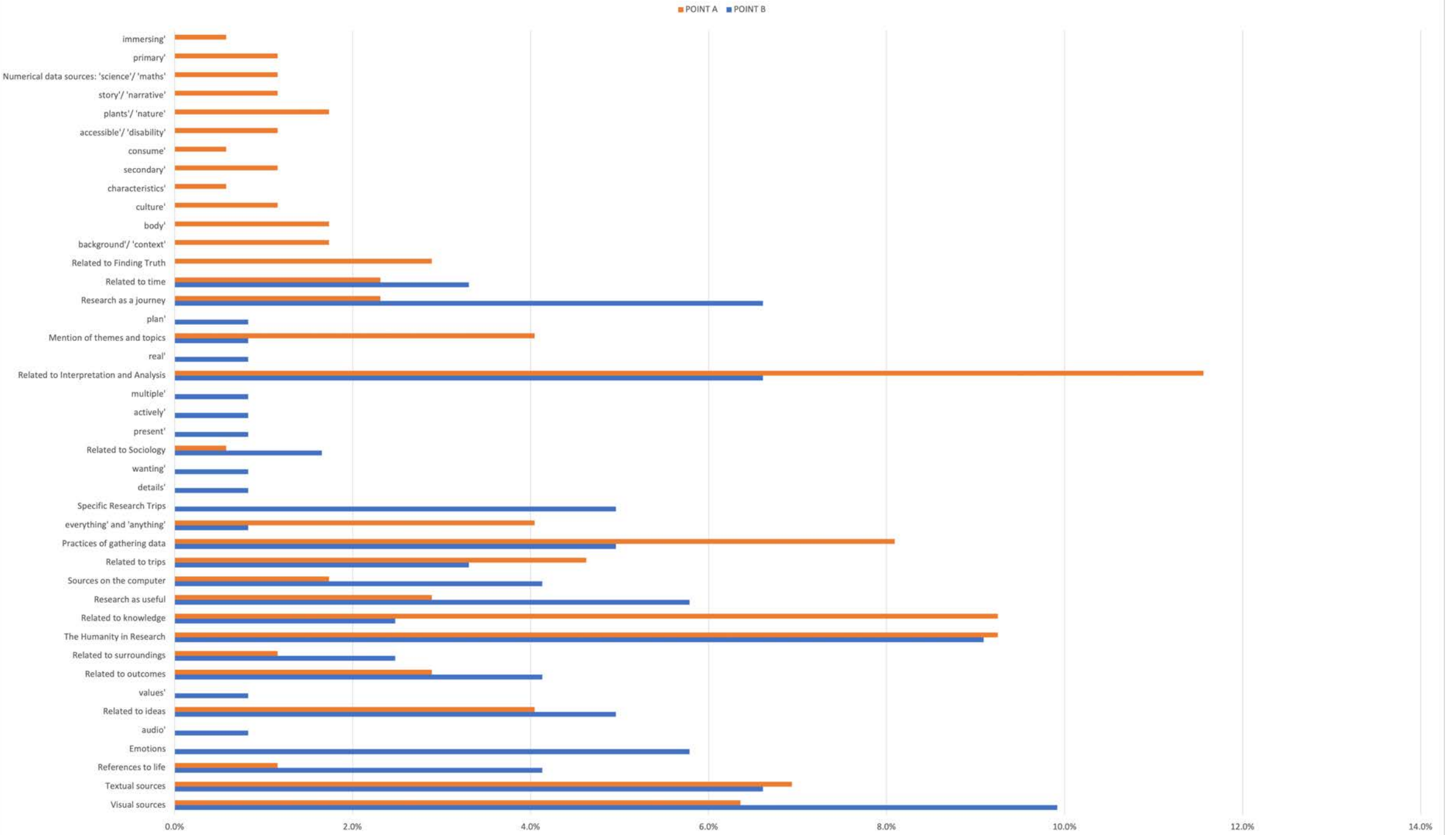Social phenomenon.
↓
The project
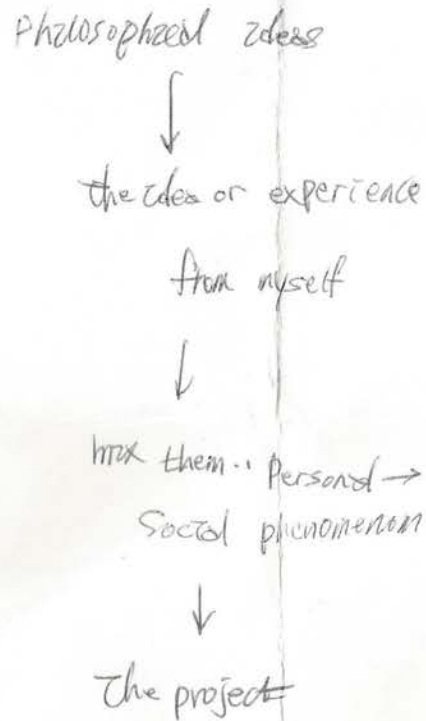
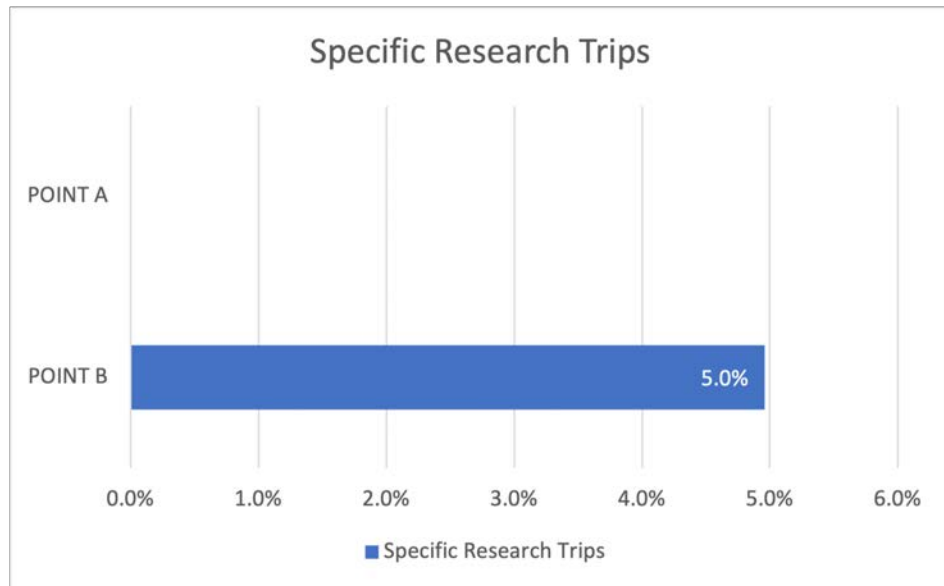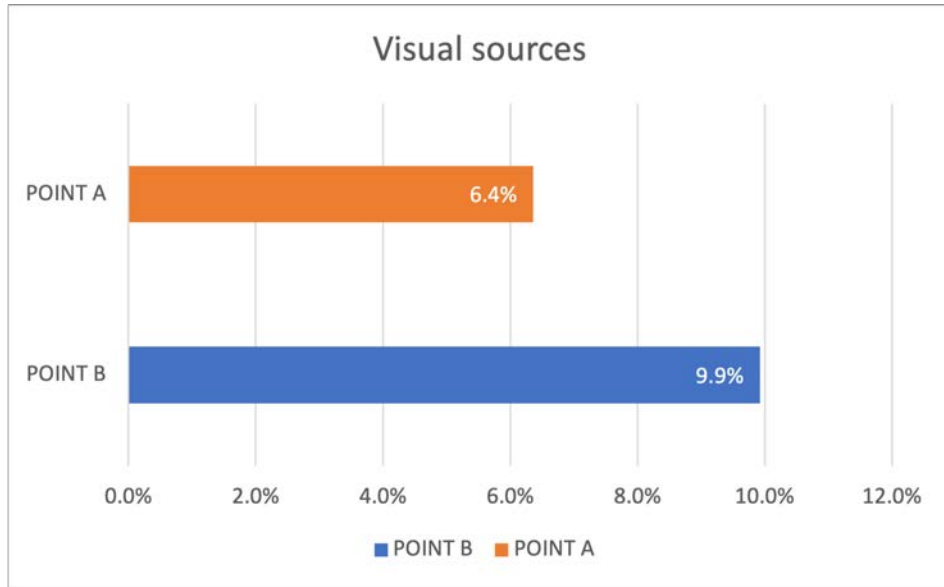Through watching films, trailers; reading poetry and literature across multiple eras. Through the insight into human behaviour and how it affects a society and its core values and themes.
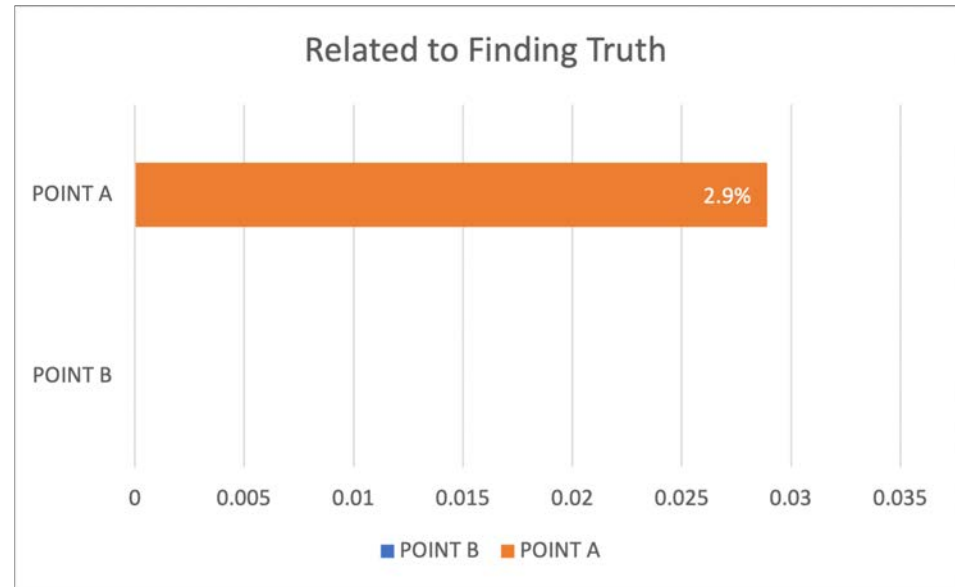
Designing
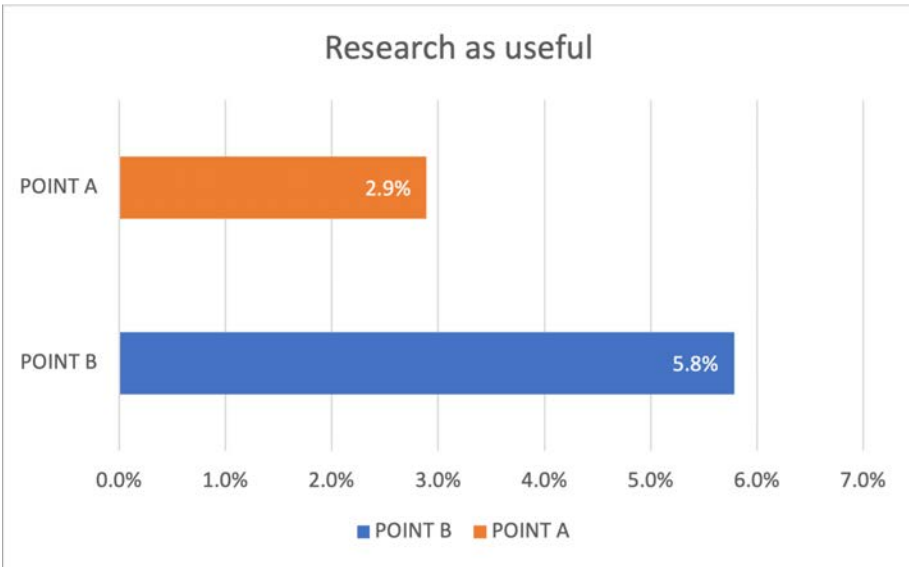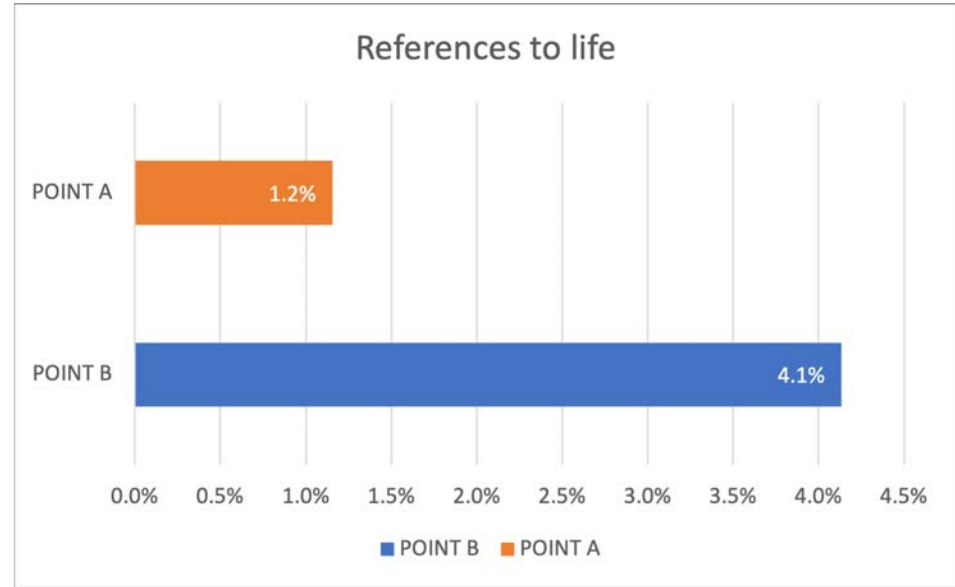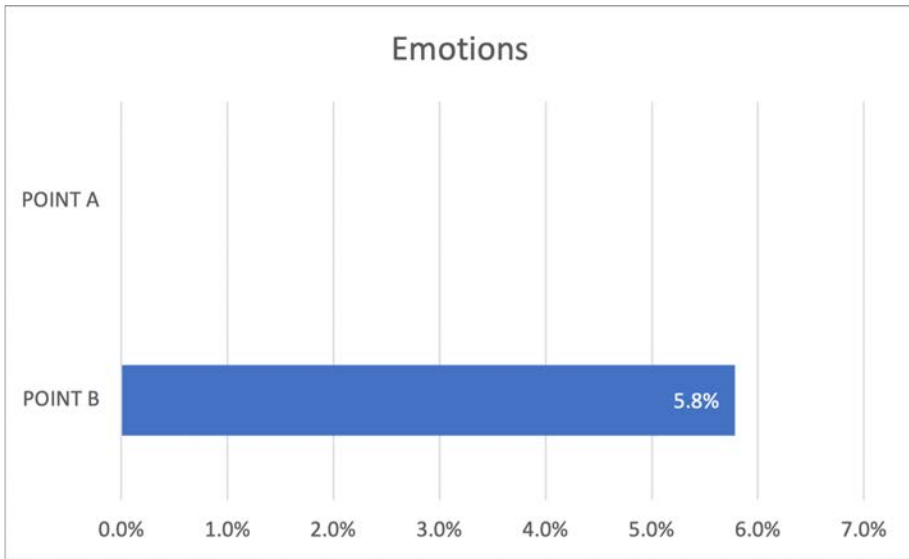Dialogues of characters
.. Background design

Student definitions of Research: Comparative analysis

POINT A POINT B

Category	
immersing'	
primary'	
Numerical data sources: 'science'/ 'maths'	
story'/ 'narrative'	
plants'/ 'nature'	
accessible'/ 'disability'	
consume'	
secondary'	
characteristics'	
culture'	
body'	
background'/ 'context'	
Related to Finding Truth	
Related to time	
Research as a journey	
plan'	
Mention of themes and topics	
real'	
Related to Interpretation and Analysis	
multiple'	
actively'	
present'	
Related to Sociology	
wanting'	
details'	
Specific Research Trips	
everything' and 'anything'	
Practices of gathering data	
Related to trips	
Sources on the computer	
Research as useful	
Related to knowledge	
The Humanity in Research	
Related to surroundings	
Related to outcomes	
values'	
Related to ideas	
audio'	
Emotions	
References to life	
Textual sources	
Visual sources	

0.0%   2.0%   4.0%   6.0%   8.0%   10.0%   12.0%   14.0%

Comparative Analysis

Visual sources

POINT A — 6.4%
POINT B — 9.9%

■ POINT B ■ POINT A

Specific Research Trips

POINT A —
POINT B — 5.0%

■ Specific Research Trips
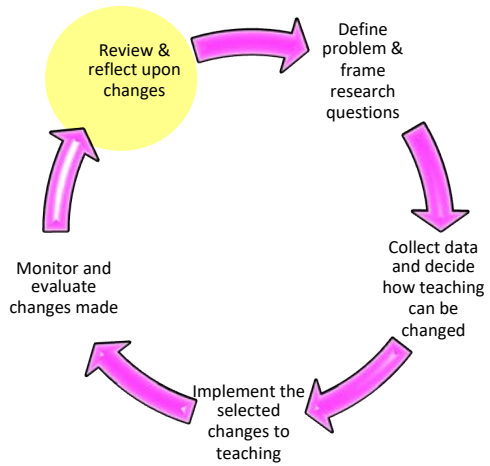
- Most frequently referenced were visual sources (9.9%). This included 'video essays', 'documentary', 'stills' as well as 'gallery'. We could combine this theme with the category 'Specific Research Trips' (5%), all of which mentioned could also be considered 'visual sources' e.g. 'Sarah Lucas exhibition'. So, post-intervention, students are much more specific in their naming of specific visual sources, and 'art' is no longer contentious as a valid research source as it was at Point A. Rather, it is far and away now the most popular thing to mention, holding about 6% more of the conversation than the next most popular theme.

Other themes where there was a big difference between Point A and Point B data

Review &
reflect upon
changes

Define
problem &
frame
research
questions

Collect data
and decide
how teaching
can be
changed

Monitor and
evaluate
changes made

Implement the
selected
changes to
teaching

Conclusions

Research

I love research!

Library!

Online thesis
databases

← the best

Video essay)
youtube

BFI
library
goated

instagram
poll

NOT WIKIPEDIA

- Despite my initial feelings post discussion, through textual analysis, I could see that there *were* in fact some specific research sites mentioned, whereas in the previous discussion at the beginning of the unit, there had been none. Interestingly, all these research sites were ones the students had gone to on their own, rather than ones I'd taken them on. The Tate and the Wellcome were on the worksheet I'd given them, but the BFI was not.

- The nature of the trips mentioned; higher frequency of emotional language; frequent reference to research as useful and related to life in some way, leads me to the conclusion that I was successful in empowering some students to find ways of doing research that was genuinely useful for them.

- While I had been disappointed that no one mentioned the trips I'd taken them on – this is not necessarily a negative sign – rather it might mean they are empowered to think independently to find their own ways of doing research. That said, all Stage 1 students were meant to have gone on a trip and yet the number of specific places named was still low.

- For this reason, to answer my second research question, I needed to understand more about the impact of my interventions on this change. I didn't want to speculate too much on what had caused this change as it would effect my teaching in the future. So I sent out an online survey to understand more of the specifics and the reasons being these responses.
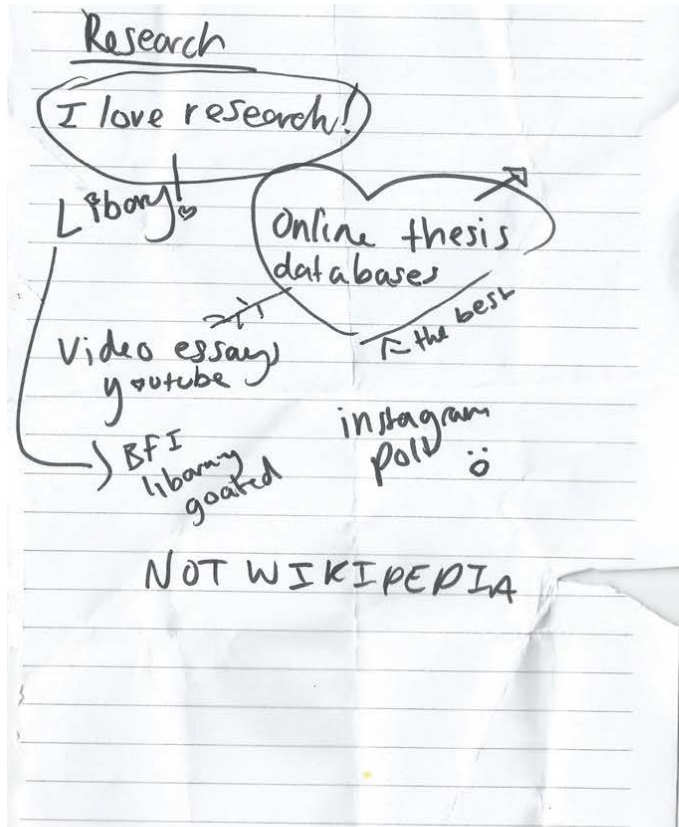
1. Did you go on your own research trip as part of Unit 2?

- Yes   8
- No   1
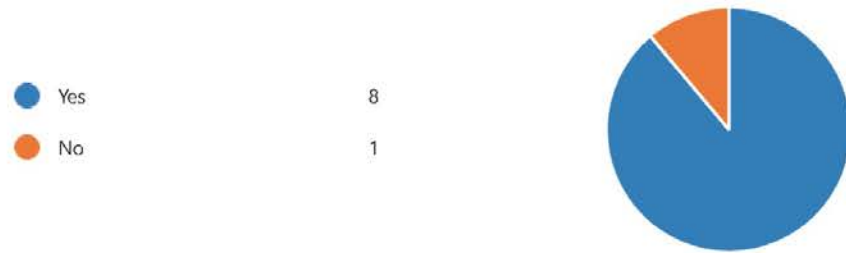
2. If yes, where did you go?

9

Responses

- Walthamstow Wetlands
- British Library
- BFI
- National Gallery and Nature Reserve
- Wellcome Collection, 'The Cult of Beauty'
- Hunterian Museum
- N/A
- BFI
- BFI

3. During unit 2, you were taken on three research trips: to the Warburg Collection, the National Gallery and Bethnal Green Nature Reserve. You also had the opportunity to go on your own research trip.

Did you find any of these to be useful for what you made for your Unit 2 'Experiments in Co-creation' project?

- Yes   5
- Maybe   2
- No   2

6. As pat of Unit 2, you were taken to a range of different types of site where research could take place. How likely are you like to visit the following in the future, for your own research purposes?

■ Very likely   ■ Somewhat likely   ■ Somewhat unlikely   ■ Very unlikely
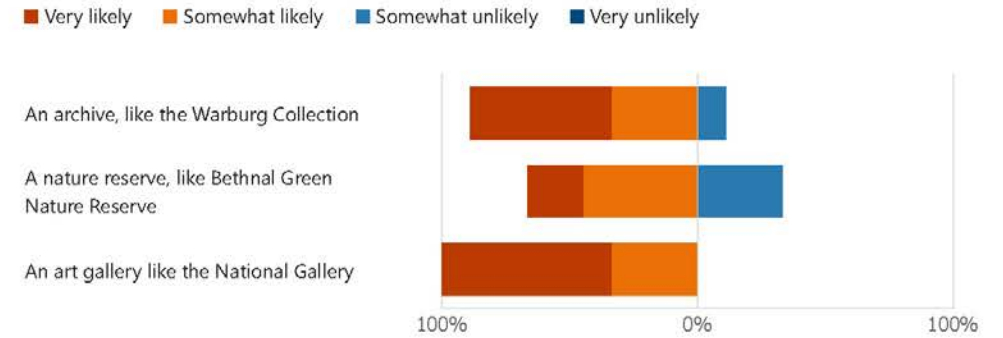
7. Has your attitude towards research changed over the course of the unit?

- Yes   6
- No   3
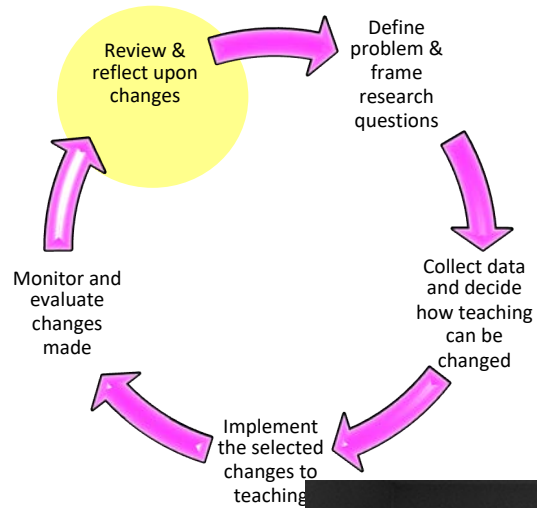
Final Conclusions

- From all the data, I can say that my interventions had a positive effect on expanding student definitions of research beyond the turnstiles of the university.

- Several students went on self-organized research trips to help them with their final outcomes, to sites including archives, museums and nature. They said they'd be likely to do this again. Most students expanded their definition of research to include visual sources including art, film and lived experience outside the university.

- In general there is a greater diversity of definitions of research – showing a break down in any idea that there is a 'correct' definition that the university legitimizes. Students are on a journey to now define research for themselves, beyond the Western imperial standard.

Untitled (Woman playing Solitaire), Carrie Mae Weems, 1990.
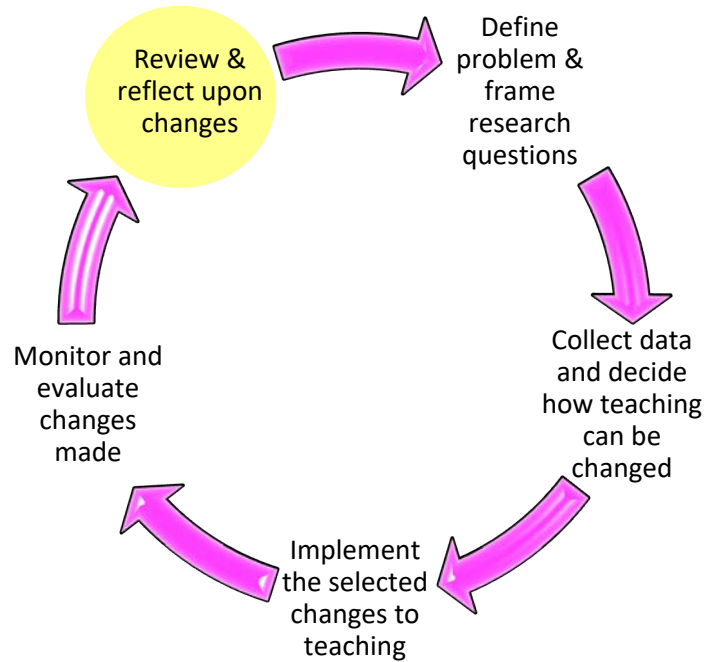
Moving Forward

- For me, this has been a useful exercise in refining the curriculum I've been developing for the students. Through the design of the new interventions and the data collection, I have been able to better understand the impact I'm having on students, and be more explicit in my pedagogical aim to challenge 'intellectually elitist' (hooks, 1993) notions of research.

- One thing to note is that I didn't bring in the students too much on my own decolonial and black feminist rationale for making the interventions. I held back on this because I didn't want to influence the student answers too much at the stage of this Action Research Project, rather I wanted to gain understanding of early undergraduate perceptions of research.

- That said, in future interactions with the same students at Stage 2, this rationale and political motivation for expanding definitions of research is something I do want to share. Perhaps it would lead to bolder experiments in research. In Unit 6 I have already begun to be more transparent in this through getting students to read and discuss bell hooks' 'Engaged Pedagogy' in class, as a way to be more conscious about how we learn and the political potential of education.