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Exporting Creativity: Visual Artefacts and Mark-making for Creative Thinking and Problem Solving in Business Management, a Case Study

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Abstract: Under the theoretical frame of Applied Visual Enquiry (AVE), Project *e-ma* (2013-2016) took the Japanese cultural artefact *e-ma*³ (絵馬、えま) as its leaping off point for utilising and exploring visual methods for unorthodox or non-linear purposes. Working in Belfast's Donegall Pass with a forgotten working-class community, these votive tablets were used by Woollock as a means to engage that community with ideas centred on hope. However, rather than writing their aspirations onto the *e-ma*, which is customary practice in Japan, participants were instead invited to paint onto them. This painting or 'mark-making' pertained to a visual manifestation of their hopes, dreams, desires, or aspirations for the future of their families, their community, and their City. This divergent methodological approach was instigated principally due to a belief in the proclivity of mark-making, which unlike the written word, has potentiality to circumvent rational thought and linear mental processes. The resultant *e-ma* were then displayed on a purpose built frame in the public park at the centre of the local community. Once on the frame, these visual artefacts were transformed from individual *e-ma* into an interactive installation which anyone could touch, rearrange or interact with. In situ they also became a focal point for generating oral data and promoting discourse amongst local residents who stopped to talk about the display. Of all the numerous methods by which *e-ma* were able to generate data, it was observing this element of the research which piqued the interest of the authors. Keen to observe if *e-ma* had the potentiality to prove useful in other areas or fields, especially within more confined pedagogical loci, they considered their use in other domains. Given the propensity of *e-ma* to generate both oral and visual data and the dialogical nature of the artefact employed in this unorthodox way, the authors began to consider its further use and adaption for pedagogical purposes, notably within the field of management studies and education. This short research note outlines a collaborative workshop held by the authors as a means to directly explore the potentiality of *e-ma* for problem solving and business management education where creative methods and creativity seems lacking yet necessary.

Keywords: Applied Visual Enquiry (AVE), *E-ma* (絵馬), Business Management, Exporting Creativity, Design Thinking, Japanese Culture

応用ビジュアル探究 (AVE) の理論的枠組みのもと、プロジェクト「*e-ma*」(2013～2016年)は、日本の文化的工芸品である絵馬をビジュアル・メソッドの出発点として活用し、非線形的・非正統的な目的への応用を探った。ベルファストのドネゴール・パスにおいて、忘れ去られた労働者階級のコミュニティと協働したウーロックは、絵馬を「希望」というテーマでそのコミュニティと関わるための手段として用いた。ただし、日本における慣例である文字の奉納ではなく、参加者は絵馬に絵を描くよう促された。この「描くこと」あるいは「痕跡を残すこと」は、家族・コミュニティ・都市の未来に向けた希望・夢・願望を視覚的に表現する行為であった。この方法論的転換の根底にあるのは、記述言語とは異なり、痕跡を残す行為が合理的思考や線形的な精神プロセスを迂回するという確信である。完成した絵馬はコミュニティ中心の公園に設置された専用フレームに

³ *E-ma* (pronounced like the girl's name 'Emma') are postcard-sized wooden votive tablets onto which visitors to *shintou* shrines in Japan invariably write their hopes and desires for the forthcoming year.

展示され、個々の作品はやがて、誰でも触れ、並べ替え、関与できるインタラクティブなインスタレーションへと変容した。展示は近隣住民が立ち止まり語り合う場ともなり、口頭データの生成と対話促進の核となった。絵馬が持つ多様なデータ生成の可能性の中でも、この対話的側面が著者らの関心を最も強く引いた。より限定された教育的文脈においても絵馬が有効に機能しうるかを検証すべく、著者らは他領域への応用を検討し始めた。視覚データと口頭データの双方を生成する絵馬の特性と、その対話的性質を踏まえ、著者らは経営学と教育学—とりわけ創造的手法が求められながらも乏しい分野—への応用と適応を構想した。本稿は、ビジネス教育における問題解決への絵馬の有効性を直接探ることを目的として著者らが実施した共同ワークショップを概説するものである。

Introduction

“Project *e-ma*” was a global mindfulness project conceived, devised, and implemented by the corresponding author between 2013 and 2016⁴ as the central tenet of their doctoral research. This research which was carried out for the award of a Ph.D. conferred by the School of Education at The Queen’s University of Belfast (QUB) was funded by a competitive scholarship from Northern Ireland’s Department of Employment and Learning (DEL). Supervisors for the doctoral research were Professors Ruth Leitch and Maruška Svašek, to both of whom sincere thanks should be extended.

At its core Project *e-ma* was situated around two core tenets. Firstly it was concerned with extending previous research conducted by the corresponding author on the re-application and re-interpretation of the Japanese cultural artefact *e-ma*, and secondly—perhaps more importantly—using AVE, it extended

and developed both of the authors’ interest in the use of mark-making⁵ for secondary purposes. Despite being from disparate academic disciplines, the authors shared a deep interest in the possibility of visual methods as a conduit through which to not only teach or engage educands with a secondary subject, but also to pursue a belief in the interdisciplinary nature of creativity and visual expression as a stand alone or exportable phenomenon. For them, it seemed a curious anomaly that creative expression⁶ and mark-making, perhaps because of its association with Fine Art, notions of artistic competence (largely based upon erroneous comparisons to realism), and the position of Art in society (often considered as *élite*, for the middle-classes⁷ or increasingly outside the Academy⁸) was not only significantly underutilised, but actually shunned, something Bogdanova had fought against in her field for some time. In addition to this it seemed a curious exemption that in the supposed age of heterogeneity,

⁴ In actuality the exploration of *e-ma* began in 1999, when the corresponding author used them as a means of exploring contemporary Japanese culture as part of their M.A. (photography) from the Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in England. Following their graduation from Queen’s, the corresponding author also conducted other much smaller incarnations of the Project in Dalian, China and Gifu, Japan.

⁵ As can be generally inferred from the term, which does not have a universal descriptor, mark-making stands in opposition to art. As the descriptor implies, the act of mark-making is about making marks, which are not necessarily intended to be ‘artistic’ per se (although the result may be). Instead mark-making, as defined here is about placing onto a surface or substrate marks which aim to convey in visual form something other, for example, an idea, a concept, an opinion or a response. As a postmodern undertaking such a loose definition should provide sufficient demarcation as to allow others to interpret the concept as they deem appropriate.

⁶ Creative expression in this guise can take many forms including (but not exclusively to), scrapbooks, sketchbooks, collage, model making, and forms of sketching and painting, but is specifically *not* about *Art* as a stand alone practice. Creative expression is simply a secondary locus or repository for holding a primary thought, idea, or exploration.

⁷ In the Weberian sense, at least, Fine Art can never be considered a proletarian or working class pursuit as it does not produce a tangible benefit or useful output for workers in terms of meeting the sustenance or nutritional needs of working people required to toil each day for survival. Fine Art was the pursuit of the middle and upper classes who could afford to have someone toil by proxy on their behalf so that they could pursue a pastime of leisure free from labour.

diversity, inter-disciplinary, and collaborative research (something QUB pushed very hard), that such little genuine collaboration was evident or apparent.

Derived from this complex situation coupled to a shared curiosity, the authors began a practice of extensive discussion where a myriad of ideas were exchanged and a plethora of possible outcomes or applications considered. From the common ground which was established, the idea was born that *e-ma* had the potentiality to be tested for use within Bogdanova's field of management education. In this field, it seemed that there was a tension between approaches which were accepted and approaches that were appropriate, and therefore a research gap was identified. The authors concurred that a number of very important factors were currently missing from (management) education and they believed visual methods, especially mediated through the use of *e-ma* could make significant contributions in five distinct areas. Firstly, it was acknowledged that *e-ma* had the potentiality to be used at brainstorming sessions in a similar way to Postit® notes have been used, that is participants at a brainstorming session would be given a number of *e-ma* and asked to record onto them their responses to a problem, question or quandary. These *e-ma* would then be collectively displayed in the area of the classroom, lab or workshop, after which they would be thematically grouped, sub-grouped, and arranged for further discussion and consideration in order to address the issues at hand. Next *e-ma* had the capacity to be used for specific problem solving, e.g., members of a team would each be given *e-ma* onto which they would record a visual response to a particular part of the overarching problem or issue under critique. At the end of the session these would then be hung together (to represent the entire problem) and a further dialogical session would ensue during which each individual would field questions on their specific contribution and ideas. *E-ma* also had the propensity to be used for sustained development and organisational change, insofar as if an aspect of the business was separated and recorded individually onto a set

⁸ Global academia is arguably becoming increasingly metrics-based and dominated by the quantitative disciplines and their modes and methods of assessment, appraisal, and practice. Those disciplines', methods, and approaches which fall outside these rubrics have, over the last several decades, lost ground, this despite the fact that visuality continues to play an increasing important role in contemporary global society



Figure 1. The *e-ma* on display as a public art installation at a park in the Donegall Pass. ©Woollock



Figure 2. Local children hanging their painted *e-ma* on the community frame. ©Woollock



Figure 3. Young women from the local community discussing the *e-ma* (generating oral data). ©Woollock

number of these could be displayed in a particular area (e.g., a boardroom, vestibule or restricted area). Displayed on a permanent frame, these *e-ma* can also be re-ordered, reorganised, overwritten and discarded (updated). In addition to this, *e-ma* have the potentiality to physically encapsulate an area of business. In this regard something could be expressed on a set number of *e-ma* and these could, if required, then be dispatched to another office or location who would then own that idea. That location could then send their *e-ma* to another branch or facility and so on. In this regard, for example, logistics departments could send their problem to the advertising department, who could pass on their problem to the security or cleaning contractors, an approach which would bring a totally fresh pair of eyes to any given problem. Finally, the authors concluded that there was a possibility that *e-ma* also act as a means to convey to staff and customers the changing policies and goals of a company. If, for example a frame with painted *e-ma* was displayed in the lobby or foyer, visiting staff, employees, and new recruits could see in physical terms what the company stood for. As soon became clear to the authors in their extensive discussions, the possibilities for using and re-using an artefact like *e-ma* within the sphere of business management (and this business management education) were limitless.

The Concept and Approach

The aforementioned dialogue and extensive discourse which had taken place between the authors, had manifested itself into both a draft of a journal article and an acceptance to present at The 18th Annual Irish Academy of Management (IAM) Conference at NUI Galway. On March 11, 2014, however, their collaborative partnership took a new turn in the form of an informal workshop. The venue for this artistic and creative exchange was the School of Education at QUB. Woollock, then a doctoral student in the School, and Bogdanova, then a full-time member of faculty at the Queen's School of Business, held an inter-disciplinary collaboration mark-making session for the purposes of attempting to

realise, visualise, and actualise previous discourse. Whilst the specific purpose and parameters of this creative exchange were unset, it was loosely focused on a quasi self-referential attempt to use *e-ma* as a literal means of recording their possible use within management education and organisational practice. That is to infer that arising from their countless discussions prior, a focused conversation ensued during which elements of possible inclusion within management and management education were discussed. From this discussion, which was largely moderated by Bogdanova, Woollock then engaged in real-time mark-making on the *e-ma* in a seamless and cyclical manner. Bogdanova then interrogated the mark-making further and produced hand-written annotations pertaining to each of the *e-ma* which represented a different facet of their possible use and application. These annotations were then adhered to the back of the *e-ma* for post-workshop discussion and clarification. Rather than summate the entire exchange, Bogdanova's largely unedited video of the event can be seen via the QR code below, which captures the spontaneity of the collaboration in real time.



Figure 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOkxTGP3Bmk>

The Outworkings of the Exchange

During the creative exchange eighteen *e-ma* were painted, each of which represented a direct correlation between a facet of creativity and its application and appropriation to not only management education, but also to recognising creativity as an independent force. These *e-ma* can be seen on the following pages.

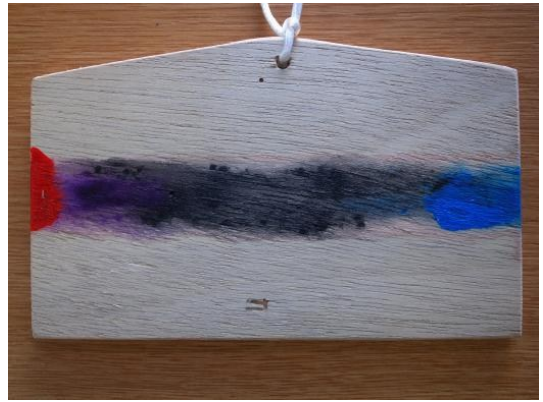


Figure 5. Individual versus group (L). Reflection (R). ©Woollock



Figure 6. Reflection and action (L). *E-ma* (R). ©Woollock



Figure 7. Tactile (L), Group and Society (R). ©Woollock



Figure 8. Organisational Change (L), Creativity (R). ©Woollock

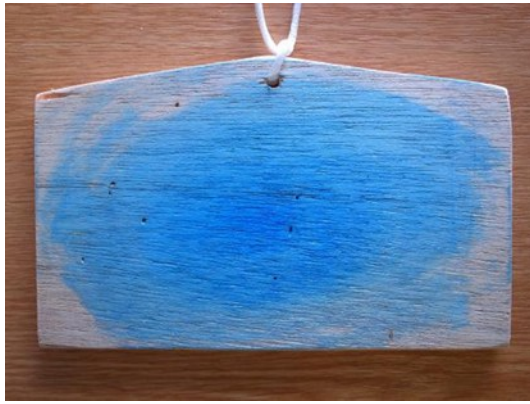


Figure 9. Dynamism (L), Innovation (R). ©Woollock

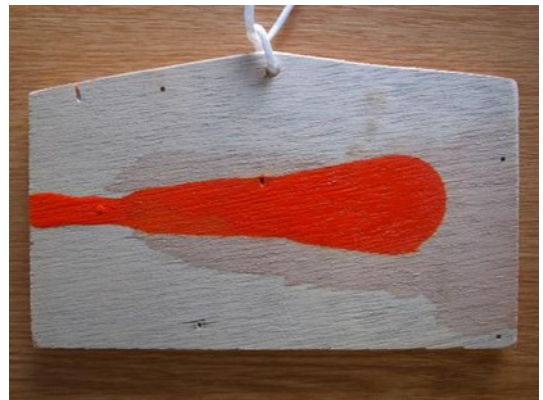


Figure 10. Comfort Zone (L). Limitations. (R). ©Woollock



Figure 11. Methodology (L), Disruptive Structure (R). ©Woollock



Figure 12. Criticality (L), Overwrite: Speak Back (R). ©Woollock



Figure 13. Intrinsic Engagement (L), Problem Solving (R). ©Woollock



Figure 14. Each *e-ma* had a memo attached to its reverse side describing its visual representation . ©Woollock



Figure 15. Once the *e-ma* were painted they were displayed in readiness for the next stage. ©Woollock

Discussion

The central focus of this experiment pertained to the question of whether or not the use of *e-ma*, which had been successfully used by the corresponding author in various forms spanning more than a decade, could be used in the sphere of business management education. If this was possible, the further question remained what form that might take, and additionally what that might look like.

Theoretically speaking, as was noted prior in the latter half of the Introduction, the authors, drawing from their considerable primary experience in classroom practice, had postulated a number of possible ways in which *e-ma* could respond to the needs of corporate management, institutional development and change. Whilst there was no opportunity to test these hypotheses, these were not within the initial scope of this enquiry, which had much more modest

aims. Initially it was conceived that workshops would be run by the authors with a cohort of Bogdanova's undergraduate students within the Management School at Queen's. This would be one approach of a triad of approaches, the others being an initial conference presentation on this working model, which took place in Galway at The 18th Annual Irish Academy of Management (IAM) Conference, and a subsequent journal article reporting the findings from the use within Bogdanova's class. Sadly, as institutional and time constraints prevented the exploration with business management students, the journal article failed to manifest.

From the experience garnered from the event which is noted here, a number of key issues were explored and interacted with although none were drawn to finite conclusions which is perhaps in keeping with the postmodern undergirding of this undertaking. What was witnessed can be described as realising the potentiality of *e-ma* to be further utilised in pedagogical settings beyond the immediate scope of their intended use. Such a finding alludes to greater possibilities above and beyond the way the corresponding author had engaged with *e-ma* thus far and perhaps most importantly it throws down a challenge to other educational practitioners, particularly those concerned with praxis, to investigate how they might use *e-ma* in their own unique way thus contributing to a burgeoning body of research focused on disruptive pedagogies under the umbrella of Applied Visual Enquiry (AVE).

Reflecting back on this event, it occurs to us that a spontaneous collaborative event such as this is an extremely rare, fragile, and valuable occurrence, and seems perhaps only able to exist outside the Academy in its current state. In order to thrive, these events seem to need to occur at an intersection between the planned and the unplanned, in the liminal space between the structured and the unstructured. Such a sentiment was echoed in the results the corresponding author found. When they delivered Project *e-ma* workshops within the academy, for example during the pilot phase of their research with postgraduate students and faculty members from their own School, or when delivered at the Queen's Graduate School as part of Welcome Week, the results were lacking. On both occasions, whilst difficult to locate the reason why, there was an intangible lack, and the results were somehow *bereft*. This absence had nothing to do with artistic choices nor

aesthetics; rather, it appeared as if situated in an entirely different realm, one which is much harder to locate. In stark contrast to this, when workshops were held in the field with laypeople at community venues all over Belfast, the results were significantly different. When comparing these two bodies of *e-ma* it is immediately apparent that there is a marked difference which seemed to allude to a distinction between the QUB sessions being over-thought, over-conceived, and over-deliberated to the point where the spontaneity and creativity were wrung dry and all that was left was a performative participatory exercise. Why this would be so is not specifically within the scope of this research but the fact remains that when something is tethered (even loosely) or constrained it appears deprived or lacking in some aspect and the resulting data in this instance was not significantly revelatory.

Extended Discussion and Context on Inter-disciplinary Research

Although there is currently a top-down directive within British academia to pursue collaborative or inter-disciplinary research, the reality is, however, that rarely if ever, do such occurrences manifest themselves in any sustained form which shifts the boundaries of academic disciplines. If interdisciplinary research does occur (as witnessed by the corresponding author during their time in Northern Ireland, Éire, and England), it can often appear forced, staged, contrived or slightly uncomfortable; a group of doctorate students, for example, put in a room and told to 'talk,' or a group of academics given wine and told to 'share.' In the Graduate School, at least, such relatively commonplace events seem destined to fail at producing meaningful change and instead merely served to reinforce feelings that like minds had better stick together, or that those from other fields or faculties are not quite 'on our page.' Despite QUB's⁹ push for interdisciplinary research, the sad fact is that of all the faculty members the corresponding author approached with their collaborative ideas (this business *e-ma* was but one idea) over a three-year period, it was only Bogdanova who responded with genuine interest and curiosity. What is noteworthy here is that in addition to being a full-time faculty member in the School of Management, Bogdanova is also a professional musician of some talent, meaning that her seemingly disparate interests are a fundamental part of who she is as a

⁹ QUB is simply indicative of any national British university.

person. This is in part what defines her as a human being, and is not merely a superficial add-on, something which is extremely rare in most elite academic circles where knowing more and more and about less and less is the mantra of our times. The corresponding author too holds multiple degrees including postgraduate degrees in both education and photography and has spent their entire academic career working across fields on those ideas which they find of interest, not necessarily those that fall within any one discipline.

No matter how hard faculty managers or policy makers push the idea of collaboration, perhaps it is only from curious, polymathic scholars that true cross-discipline research can arise. What we mean to infer by such a statement is that genuine cross-discipline research occurs from a place of inquisitiveness, and is not about a scholars from ‘safe,’ complementary or aligned fields collaborating. In contrast, we argue that such structures should be radically disrupted so that a scholar from engineering might collaborate with someone from musicology, an oncologist might collaborate with an architect, or a literature major might join a nursing practitioner. The very point of interdisciplinary and genuinely collaborative research should be located not at the smooth intersection of fields, but in the uncomfortable interspace where friction occurs and the disciplines collide, not neatly meld together. Divergent thinkers, *not* convergent thinkers working together should be encouraged and outcomes left more open-ended, derived from a grounded approach rather than a top-down, didactic one. It is possible that one scholar playing the ‘educated idiot’ in another scholar’s field is going to ask all the ‘wrong’ (read, *correct*) questions and approach learning in that field with a fresh pair of eyes. What they see and discover may then be translated into the technical or lexicological frame of the other discipline by experts in that field, but the locus of creativity and discovery should be left as wide open as possible.

Interestingly, whilst at QUB, the corresponding author heard a rumour that all doctoral students University-wide were going to be removed from their silos in individual faculty houses and given office space in a single building. That the individual cliques within the various houses occupied by the different schools would be disbanded and all doctoral students regardless of discipline would be forced to integrate. For example, rather than having two to four students from Education in a shared office, and resultant ‘shared bubble,’ the system would be radi-

cally altered. What would transpire instead, would be a situation where no two students from a given discipline would be allowed to share an office, thus students would be forced to integrate, discuss their research ideas with those from other fields, and share ideas as educated idiots. Hopefully the end results of this change would be a genuine and intrinsic desire to collaborate across disciplines and a genuine culture of enquiry. The authors agree that this is an extraordinary idea and only by adopting a policy as radical as this can the culture of academia begin to change. One significant issue is, however, maintaining such collaborative instincts upon graduation and entry into the global academy where silos are the dominant structure and clique building continues to be the norm.

Finally it should be noted that within global academia, an irony exists whereby many of the academic disciplines which are in greatest need of creativity are the ones which employ it least. Creativity, it seems is too closely linked to Fine or Applied Arts and not considered something which should be championed outside these spheres. The potentiality of creative arts, design thinking, and exporting creativity as a stand-alone discipline is perhaps still not fully understood. Creativity and creative or left-field thinking are, therefore, left to the natural domains of art & design where their potential is woefully underutilised focusing almost exclusively on producing visual outworkings instead of promoting how creative thinking can contribute to other domains and fields. Within the varied disciplines encompassed by the broad fields of fine and applied arts, creativity is not only taken for granted—the moot assumption being that the creative practitioner is invariably creative, but the applied use of creativity as an exportable phenomenon is invariably under considered and underemployed. However, given the increasingly complex challenges faced by a volatile post-COVID world and globalised society, creativity as an autonomous force coupled to a genuine thirst for interdisciplinary cooperation should be the dominant practices du jour championed by universities and those forging pedagogical and andragogical policies at the state level and not left to a few individuals to navigate as part of a niche arts-based community within wider academia.

Conclusion

This spontaneous workshop arose from many hours of previous discussions and the purpose was much like this brief research note, insofar as it was not meant to be a finite or monolithic experience

entity or event, rather, it was intended to raise as many questions as it tried to answer and to engage with notions pertaining to *possibility*. That it simply took place one afternoon with little prior planning and that it had few aims and objectives beyond ‘let’s try and see what happens’ stands as a testament to the authors’ openness and willingness to engage outside of established norms and protocols. That a full-time lecturer collaborated with a doctoral student - an economist collaborated with an artist on a theme of shared interest stands as a testament to possibility. Although the authors spent much time discussing the possible intersection and use of creativity in both business management and business management education, together with considering the concept of creativity as a transferable asset, this collaborative exchange was the first occasion in which discourse had given way to direct creative endeavour. The results of this exchange continue to resonate and to a large extent the task of weaving creativity into management education and organisational change remains unfinished. Sadly due to geographical and logistical constraints between the two authors, this inception and that which was documented here remains on hiatus; however, that the exchange did occur, and that it was documented so well, is an important reminder of research possibilities, and it is hoped that the record which is shared here may encourage others to pursue this idea further but also to rethink the nature of interdisciplinary research and explore their own possibilities.

Various photos and films on Project *e-ma* can be seen via the following QR codes.

YouTube



Figure 16. YouTube QR code. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKtJk6Z28uVD8Exe-oCJ2Hw/videos?view=0&sort=dd&shelf_id=Z

Flickr



Figure 17. Flickr QR code. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/projectema/albums>

Further Reading

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