

How can Visual Literacy be used to develop more inclusive and effective pedagogical practices for Post-16 learners?

ABSTRACT

With approximately 83% of information now disseminated visually (Zhu & Lim 2024), the need for learners to become visually literate “critical consumers” (Moje 2015, in Guo et al. 2024) is of utmost importance. However, existing literature on Visual Literacy has often overlooked its potential as a skillset within Further Education. This study identifies curriculum areas where Visual Literacy skills can be embedded through sustainable and meaningful approaches. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving six 16–18-year-old participants from a visual-arts A-Level course in three focus group discussions. During these sessions, participants evaluated existing visual resources before creating and sharing their own in response, explaining the creative and academic reasoning behind their design. The findings address the contemporary learner's lived experience of visual and technological change, revealing tensions between personal creative expression and perceived workplace or educational demands (Robinson 2006). This research calls for a balance between engaging pedagogical approaches and the need to prepare learners for the workplace, ultimately reframing what it means to be ‘creative’ in their educational context.

The secondary poster (accessed via the QR Code below) presents each participant's Visual Resources, alongside written commentary on the research findings using language that is accessible & appropriate to a Post-16 audience - similar to that of the participant's themselves. The aim of this format is to appeal & engage both academic & younger audiences, and therefore seeks to address the importance & awareness of Visual Literacy as a skillset.



OBSERVATIONS

Each of the 6 participants had an existing skillset with analysing & critiquing visuals as part of their curriculum for A-Level Photography. However, all participants communicated a lack of confidence in creating a range of visuals in a cross-curricular context, i.e. outside of this subject area. Seemingly, their visual creation skills, noted by Brumberger (2011), were not working in tandem with their ability to “interpret and analyse the meanings of images and visual media” (ACRL 2011). As such, this clash appeared to cause feelings of uncertainty and discouragement in the participants’ experience of exam revision or mid-topic assessments.

Participants believed that a large proportion of teachers have embraced technologies within the classroom, particularly since the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, it was noted that teachers now rely heavily on resources such as PowerPoint slides, without any further variation in multimedia/visuals to help develop the Visual Literacy skillset of learners at the same rate as their subject knowledge. Indeed, participants noted that the further they progressed within their education, the more resources appeared to be formalised and standardised, rather than championing creativity and individualism. As stated by Robinson (2006):

“Our education systems don't enable students to develop their natural creative powers. Instead, they promote uniformity and standardisation...producing a workforce that's conditioned to prioritise conformity over creativity”

RESEARCH AIMS & QUESTIONS

The aim of the study was to evaluate the ways in which Post-16 learners currently engage with their studies through the means of existing visual resources, along with how such resources could be utilised in spaces/subjects where there may currently be limited visual resources.

- What visual resources do students engage with routinely across their Post-16 curriculum?
- How do students understand the concept of visual literacy? What types of resources currently help them to make sense of complex information within the curriculum?
- How do such resources help to support learning/the process of learning in Post 16 study?
- How can Post-16 educators be supported to help produce these resources for the benefit of their students’ achievement?

THEORETICAL LENS

The theoretical lens for this research project is grounded in both Constructivist and Post-Developmentalist approaches to pedagogy. Seminal Constructivist theorist Vygotsky discusses the concept that creative insight or intent does not exist solely within artistically gifted learners. Instead, it is his belief that the ability to engage in creative processes is available to anyone with the skillset to access and harness the power of creativity (Vygotsky 2004). This is a core frame of which to perceive the benefits of developing visual literacy skills within learners of all ages – Vygotsky does not limit his thoughts to a particular age group in this thinking, nor a particular subject area or a curriculum phase. Post-developmentalism aims to try and move away from the “common-sense” and “sense-making” polarities when creating visuals (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), and instead encourages questions of “what does this image intend to do for us?” rather than “what does this image intend to show us?” engaging with visuals (Sakr & Osgood 2020).

Key themes from the review of existing literature detail how the notion of creativity in relation to visuals has evolved over the course of contemporary educational development. Namely, concepts of ‘Playful Pedagogy’, technology & communication, and community & culture are explored at length to contextualise the demand for Visual Literacy skills.

METHODOLOGY

- 3x Focus-group sessions to gather discussion-led qualitative data from participants surround the topic of Visual Literacy

The first session discussed the concept of Visual Literacy and ascertained participant's prior knowledge/experience. The aim of this was to help not only shape the direction of the next research stage, but also to help analyse and contextualise the results during the data analysis phase (Zhu & Lim 2024). The second session provided the opportunity for learners to create a Visual Resource of their own choosing - both in terms of format and topic - in order to showcase their preferred visual methods of learning. These methods of co-creation were discussed by Lupton (2024); creative methods helped to unlock new meaning from learning that may not have been accessed via traditional resources, therefore inspiring new ideas and ways of engaging. In the final session, learners provided the academic and creative justification behind their visual resource, contextualised with their desire for a broader scope of creative pedagogical approaches within their education, as well as their desire to be prepared for the workforce on completion of their studies.

All participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, with parent/guardian consent aquired via consent forms. Participants provided a secondary signature of consent after being provided with Participant Information Sheets, which detailed their anonymity in the research process, alongside their right to withdraw and data storage summaries.

PARTICIPANT VISUAL RESOURCES & DISCUSSION POINTS

After the participants had constructed their Visual Resources in the second session, the third session's discussion revealed the following formats favoured by the participants: 2x mindmaps, 1x set of flash cards, 1x poster, 1x chart, and 1x interactive flip-book. Although each student was reminded repeatedly throughout the research that they were free to select any Visual Resource format they wished to develop, a large percentage of participants seemingly defaulted to formats that were ‘safe’, ‘traditional’, or ‘familiar’. This often contradicted the participant's higher academic ability - based off the written content within their Visual Resource - as they repeatedly commented on a lack of confidence in how to design/engage with visuals in a way that was beneficial to their own learning, rather than the ‘blanket approach’ that they experience in a classroom.

Three key themes emerged from the research: ‘Format’, ‘Design’ and ‘Function’. These themes refer to the main factors considered by participants not only when creating their own visual resources. Other sub-themes that contributed to how participants both created and engaged with visual resources were identified as ‘Generic or Tailored’, ‘Familiar or Unfamiliar’, ‘Time- or Task-Oriented’ and ‘Safety Vs Risk’.

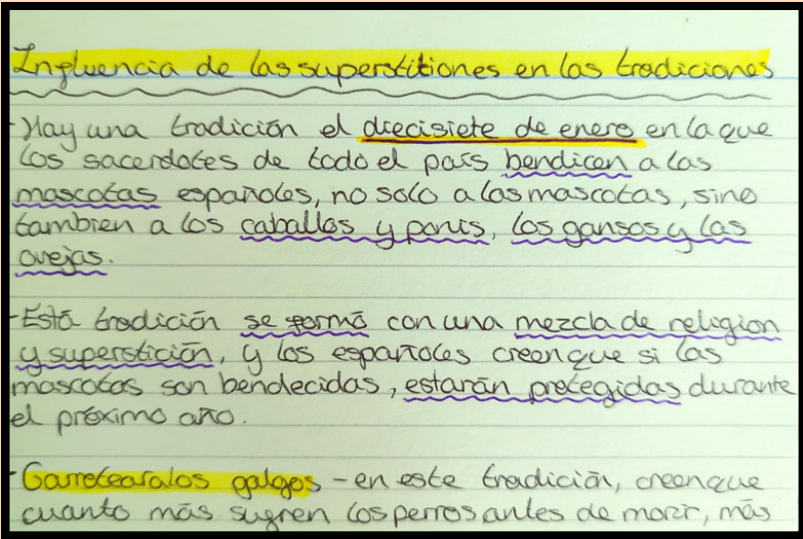


Some participants produced Visual Outcomes of their own design to aid their revision, complete with mechanical/tangible elements.

Other participants used the research project as an opportunity to showcase visual resources in extra-curricular contexts.

DATE:			
GYM PROGRESS			
DEADLIFT		BARBELL SQUAT	
REPS	KG	REPS	KG
BARBELL ROW		BENCH PRESS	
REPS	KG	REPS	KG
DUMBBELL PRESS		LAT PULDOWN	
REPS	KG	REPS	KG

Whilst some students produced more ‘traditional’ revision aids such as flash cards, opportunities to embed visuals were discussed as part of future learning opportunities.



QR CODE

For a closer look at the research participant's Visual Outcomes, please scan the QR Code below:



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

By acknowledging the comments of participants relating to a limited range of resource formats being favoured by educators, it could suggest that educators have limited confidence within their own Visual Literacy skillset (Bruger & Roberts 2017). By acknowledging Shulman's (1986) notion that effective instruction must transcend subject knowledge, it could be argued that a contextual approach of grounding curriculum content within visuals to increase student exposure to, and subsequent interpretation of, visuals may be transformative to both educators and learners in the long term. Furthermore, the understanding that contemporary learners are emerging from the “App Generation” (Gardner & Davis 2013) and are therefore potentially more aware of technology than educators, means that there must be an openness to exploring technologically-grounded creative pedagogies that allow learners the possibilities to create, explore and critique visuals.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Danielle Byatte is a Learning Resource Officer at Preston College, Lancashire (UK). She has recently completed an MA in Education with Edge Hill University's Faculty of Education.

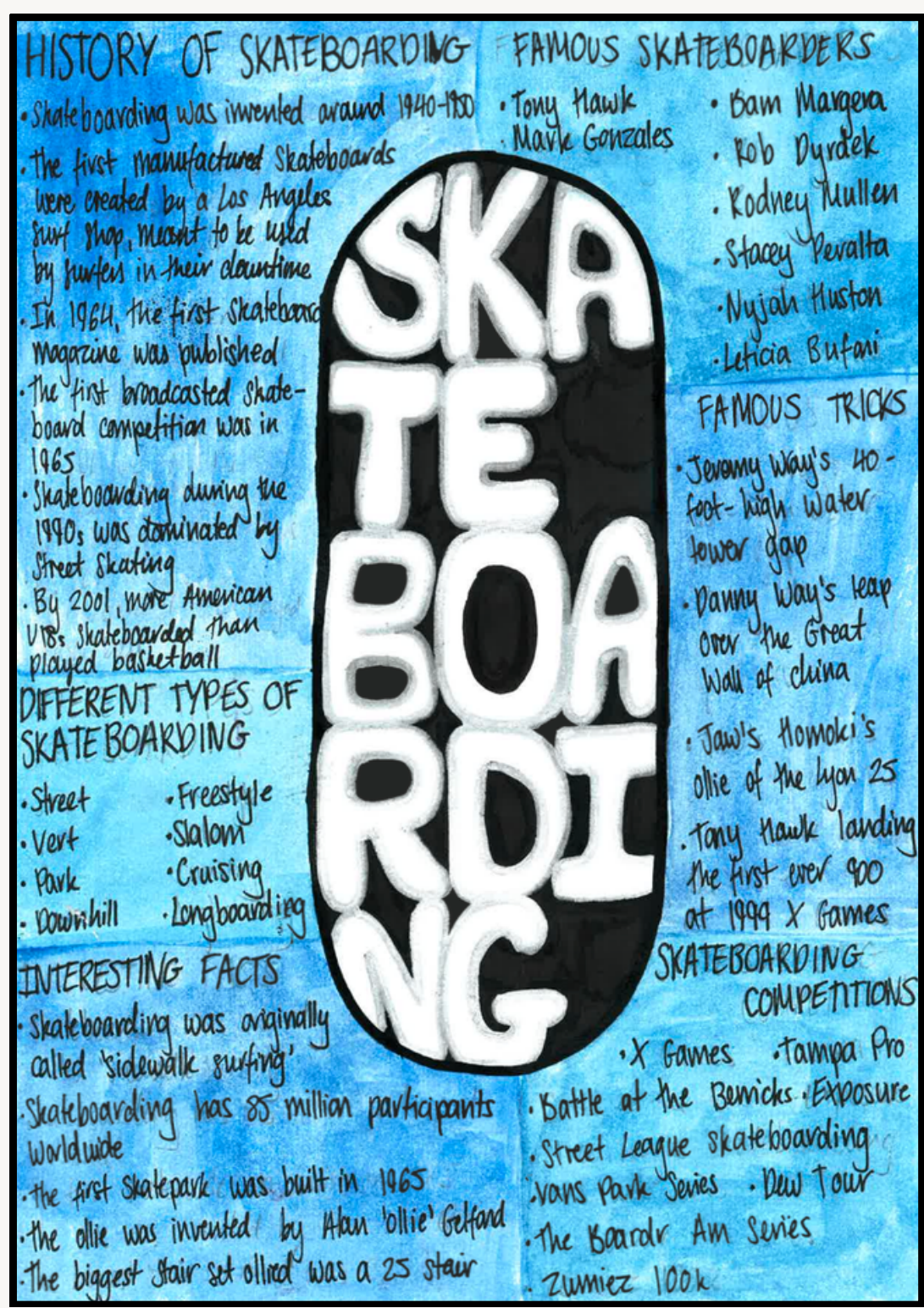
Within the scope of Visual Literacy, Byatte seeks to research sustainable approaches to embed visual literacy skillsets within areas of education outside of the visual arts. As such, this paper aims to address shortfalls in engagement with post-16 education and lifelong learning, whilst fostering increased learner confidence in academia.

To contact the researcher, email dbyatte@preston.ac.uk, or search ‘Danielle Byatte’ on LinkedIn.

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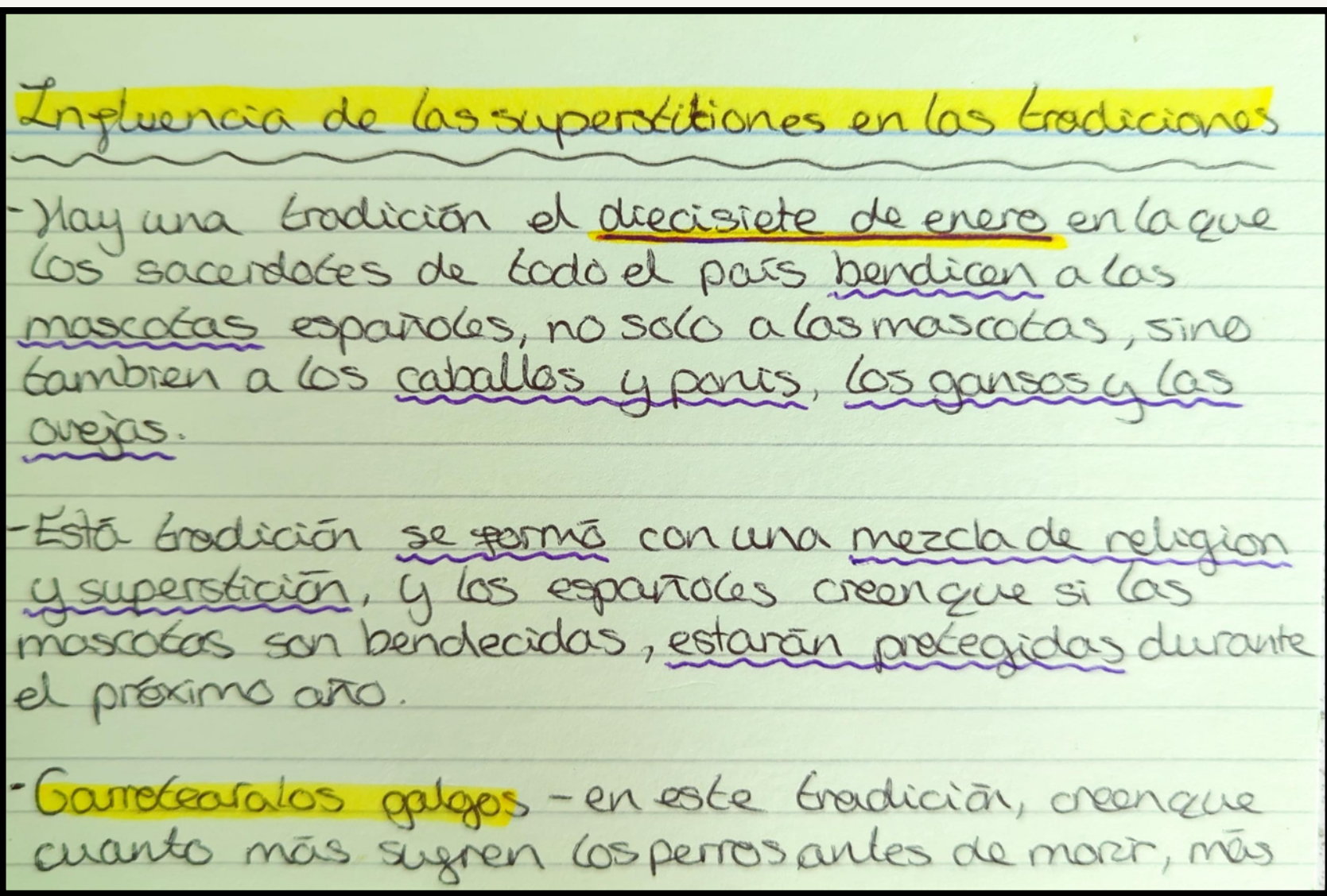
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RESEARCH PARTICIPANT'S VISUAL OUTCOMES



PARTICIPANT 1 OUTCOME: TOPIC POSTER

Participant 1 created an informative poster about her skateboarding hobby. Inspired by her recent project for her Photography A-Level which documented the skateboarding community, she included information on the history of skateboarding, fun facts, and competitions. When asked about the lack of visual images/diagrams, the participant cited a lack of confidence with drawing, and felt that the topic benefitted more from moving image (video) to be understood in practice.

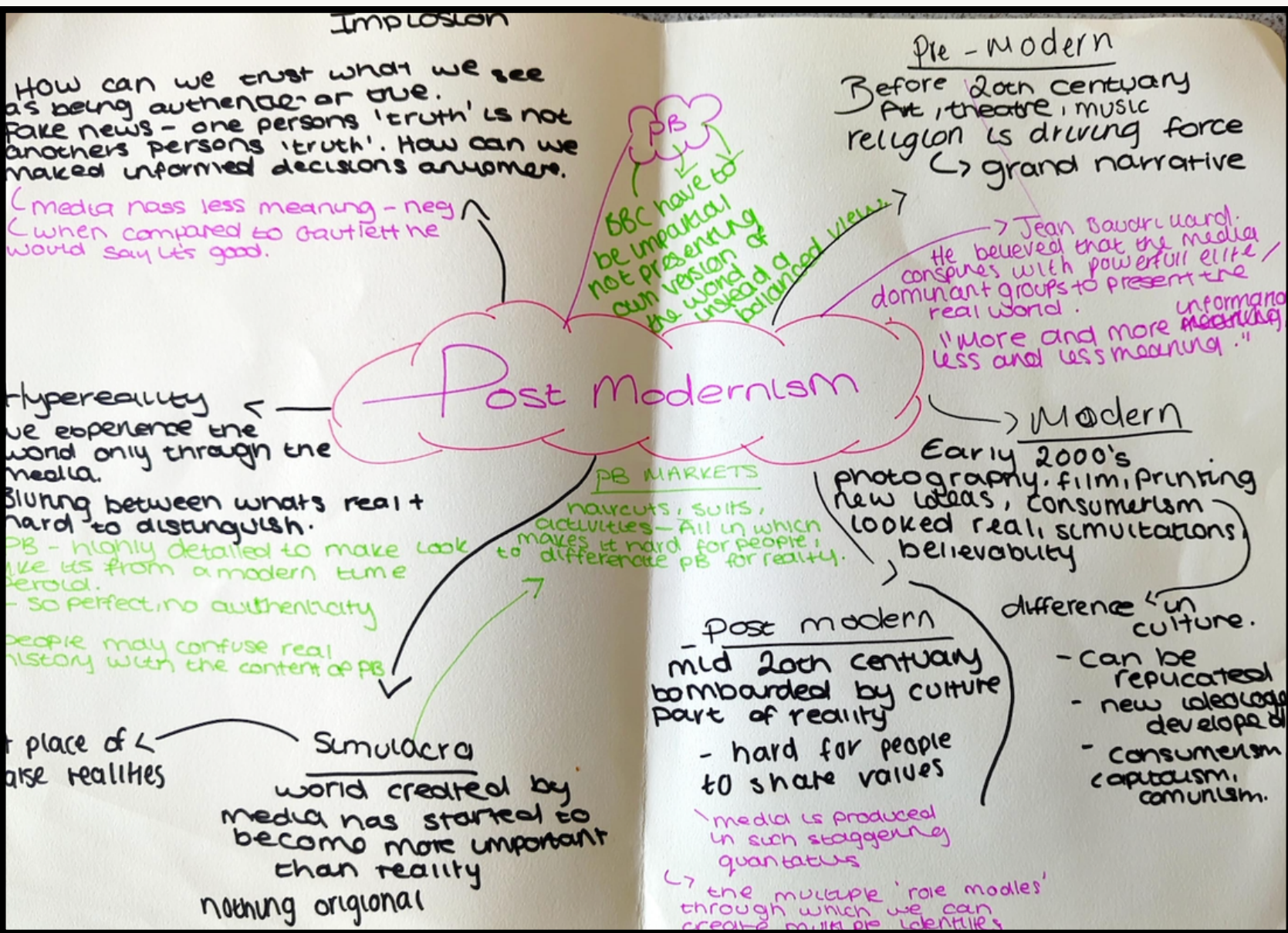
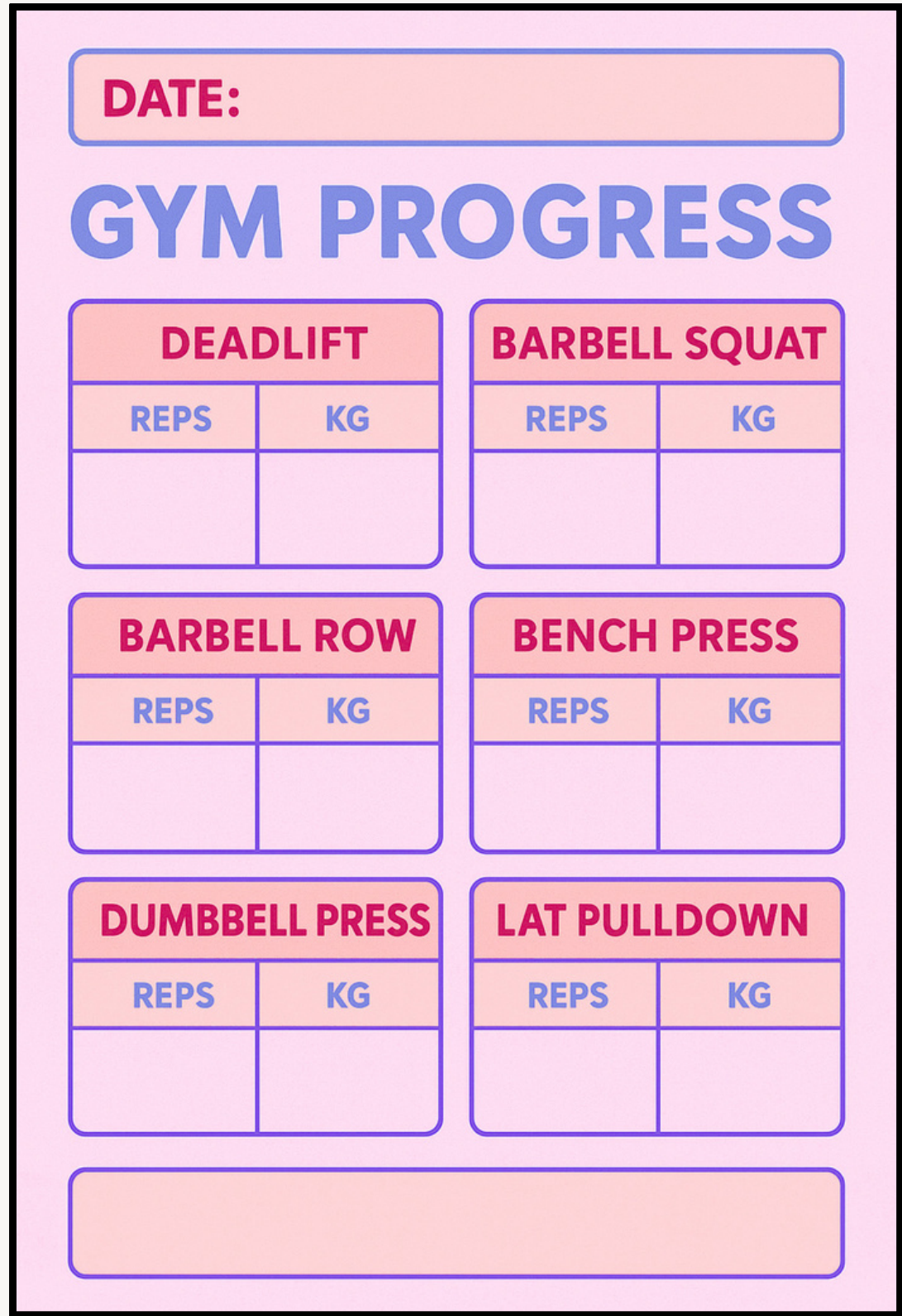


PARTICIPANT 4 OUTCOME: FLASH CARDS

Participant 4 created a collection of revision flash cards for their upcoming Spanish Oral Exam (A-Level). These flash cards were designed to help commit a series of pre-prepared answers, grammar structures & monologues to memory. The participant stated that they did not originally consider visual diagrams on their flash cards to aid recall, as their teacher had only ever discussed the importance of key vocabulary phrases. These were highlighted/underlined on the participant's Visual Resource(s) for additional emphasis during revision.

PARTICIPANT 2 OUTCOME: INTERACTIVE CHART

Participant 2 created an interactive chart that would help both her Mum & herself on their new fitness journey. The participant created this as an alternative to 'simple' notes in her notebook surrounding her fitness activities, height & weight, as she felt the interactive element - together with the grid layout - would help to encourage both of them to be more proactive and encourage each other with their progress. The layout choice was a preference of logical, minimalist design styles that are easy to understand at a glance, or from a distance.

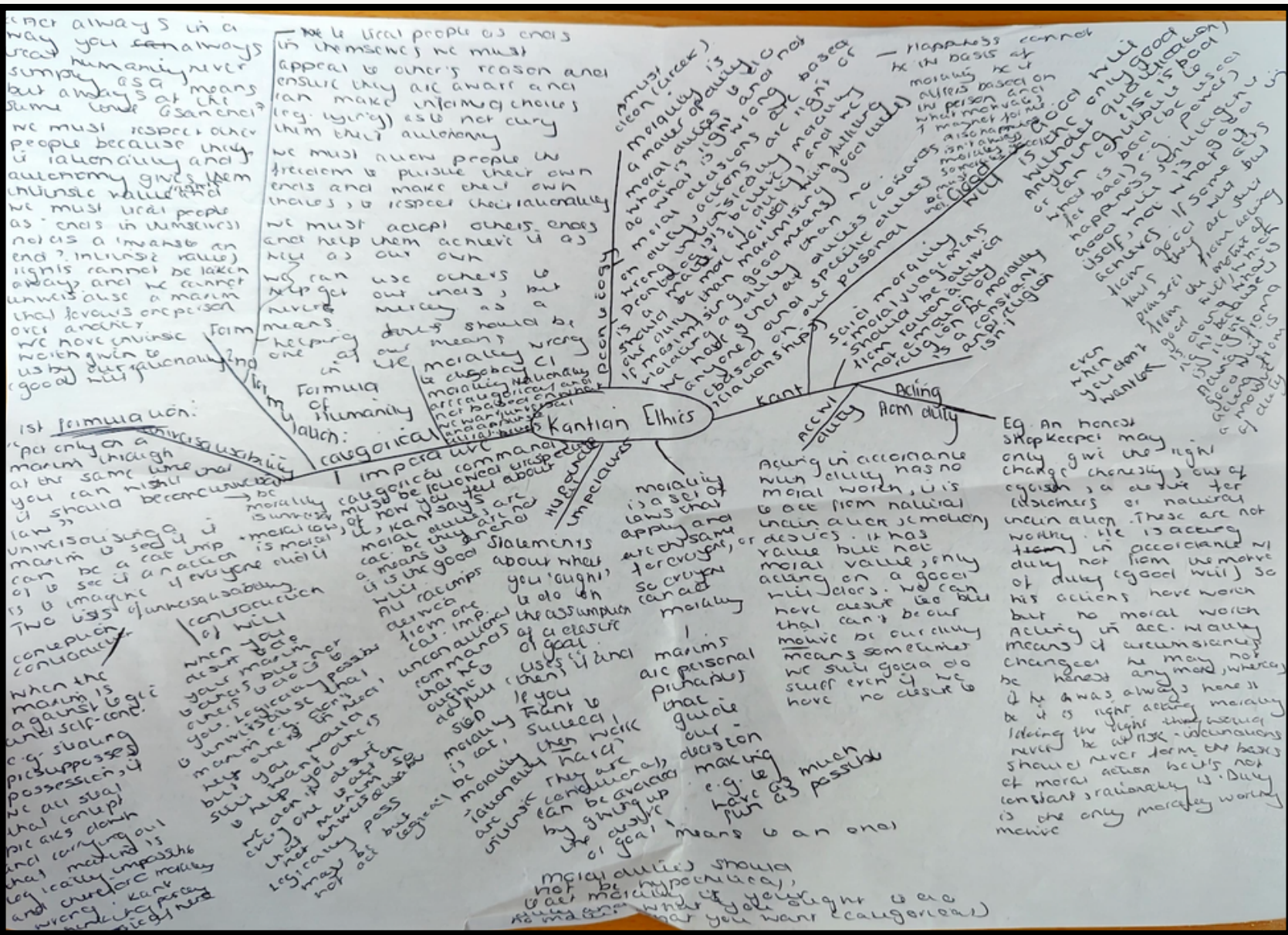


PARTICIPANT 5 OUTCOME: MINDMAP (THEORY)

Participant 5 created a mindmap based on the theory of Post-Modernism, which they needed to learn for their Media Studies exam (A-Level). The participant has used mind maps for their GCSE revision, and has therefore chosen to continue with this format as a key part of their revision at A-Level. When prompted, the participant explained that the black text was copied from her textbook, pink text from her own class notes, and the green text links existing media products to the theory for additional context & application.

PARTICIPANT 3 OUTCOME: POCKET REVISION FLIPBOOK

Participant 3 created an interactive flipbook device of their own design. The flipbook contains still frames from movie scenes, which the student needs to be able to reference & analyse during their Film Studies exam (A-Level). The participant explained that the frames are arranged in chronological order of the plot, and that this helps to recall the significance of each frame in context during their revision. They noted that the Visual Resource is pocket-sized to help with last-minute revision before entering the exam room, as well as being less intimidating than revision packs produced by teaching staff.



PARTICIPANT 6 OUTCOME: MINDMAP (WHOLE TOPIC)

Participant 6 also created a mindmap, however based this off a full topic within their Philosophy A-Level, namely Kantian Ethics. Compartitive to Participant 5's mindmap (see above), Participant 6's Visual Resource has been crammed with written text and no illustrative visuals. When prompted, the participant explained that whilst her initial mindmap may appear 'bland', the purpose is to revisit each area in turn with a highlighter as she progresses through her revision, as an interactive means of engaging with the topic.

NB: Whilst there were 6 participants within this research project, participants 5 & 6 produced multiple visual outcomes that were submitted to the researcher. As each of these outcomes were similar in terms of structure, format & purpose, the researcher selected the outcome from each participant that was the most cohesive. This decision was communicated to the participants concerned, and mutually agreed.