

Article

Circumnavigating the Revolving Door of an Ethical Milieu

Carmel Capewell *, Sarah Frodsham and Kim Waring Paynter

School of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford OX2 9AT, UK; sarah.frodsham@conted.oc.ac.uk (S.F.); kwaring-paynter@brookes.ac.uk (K.W.P.)

* Correspondence: ccapewell@brookes.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper reflects on an Ethical Review Board's (ERB) established structure of practice throughout a student-led project. We use the research project as a means of exploring the three questions set by the Editors, Fox and Busher, regarding the role of ERBs throughout the research process. We gained full university-level ethical approval in October 2020. This project initially focused on collecting data from students, from a UK university. The participatory way we collaborated with both undergraduates and postgraduates illuminated their individual unique perspectives and successfully facilitated their agentive contributions. This required on-going simultaneous negotiation of pre-determined ethical procedures through the ERB. We termed this iterative process 'circumnavigating the revolving door' as it summarised revisiting ethical approval in the light of requests from our student participants. The participants were also invited to be part of the analysis and dissemination phase of this research. Original data collected related to personalised experiences of learning during the on-going global pandemic. The philosophical approach adopted was through an adaptation of Photovoice. That is, with limited direction by the researchers, the participants were invited to construct images (photos or hand drawn pictures), with captions (written text or voice), to explore their own educative circumstances. With this in mind, this paper explores the students' participatory agency throughout this visual methods project through three lenses: namely, the appropriateness of ethical practices within a contextualised scenario (i.e., researching learning during lockdown in a higher educational institution); how the ethical process of an educational establishment supported the dynamic and iterative nature of participant-led research; and finally, how the original researchers' experiences can inform ethical regulations and policy, both nationally and internationally. The circumnavigation of the revolving door of participatory ethics has proved invaluable during this research. This iterative cycle was necessary to incorporate the students (or co-researchers) suggested contributions. One example includes gaining the ERB's approval, post full approval, for participants to audio record their own captions for a public facing website. From originally welcoming the students as participants, to facilitating them to become agentive co-researchers, it became increasingly important to provide them with opportunities to be actively involved in all parts of the research process. The reciprocal iterative relationship developed between co-researcher, researchers and the ERB served to strengthen the outcomes of the project.

Keywords: participatory research; photovoice; ethics; student-led



Citation: Capewell, C.; Frodsham, S.; Paynter, K.W. Circumnavigating the Revolving Door of an Ethical Milieu. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 250. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12040250>

Academic Editor: Eleanor Dommett

Received: 7 January 2022

Accepted: 28 March 2022

Published: 31 March 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The establishment of Institutional Review Boards, also known as Ethical Review Boards (ERBs) commenced in the 1970s. This occurred because of numerous public revelations about medical abuses of human participants in research, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis study from 1932–1972 [1], along with concern about the questionable ethics of psychological research into obedience by Milgram [2], and power dynamics of Zimbardo [3]. The need for ethical guidelines for dealing with human participants became widely recognized and ERBs were established with the initial remit of the protection of participants from harm. Today, most institutions including universities, professional organisations and funding

bodies, as well as peer-reviewed publications, require researchers to obtain ethical approval from an ERB prior to commencing any research involving human participants [2]. As a result, ERBs have become the ‘gatekeepers’ of new knowledge [3] emerging from within empirical studies. Further changes in the nature and function of ERBs came about in the 1980s. A new brand of institutional accountability and the drive for consumer satisfaction, whether it be students, funders or other stakeholders, moved universities to become more regimented and risk averse [3].

It is within the context described by Busher and Fox [3] that this paper discusses the way in which ERBs can impact research using innovative qualitative methodologies. An iterative cycle of revisiting the original ethical approval as the research progresses (the revolving door) may be required. This paper addresses the three questions set by the editors, Fox and Busher.

- What are appropriate and effective ethical appraisal and approval practices for particular contexts?
- How can institutional ethics committees effectively support educational researchers and educational research throughout the life of a study, especially those pursuing a broad range of critical and participatory studies?
- How do authors’ reflections on their experiences relate to a wider international context for ethical practice and regulation?

On 17 March 2020, with less than 24 h’s notice, UK students, including those in higher education (HE), had face-to-face studies suspended. Many were completing assessments and preparing for exams. Neither staff nor students were expecting this response to COVID-19 and thus there had been limited preparation for such an event. The enforced social distancing required new learning modes with greater use of online delivery. Such an approach to teaching and distance learning led to many students feeling anxious [4] about their immediate and potentially longer-term futures [5,6]. Additionally, students who would normally be afforded the opportunity to undertake placements (e.g., in education and health care) were no longer able to gain this important hands-on practice.

Even when on-campus teaching resumed in the academic year 2021–22, many still chose to stay at home and connect through online platforms. For those who did attend face-to-face teaching events, there was still a need for both staff and students to wear face coverings and remain socially distant. Other aspects of university life also changed dramatically, including the prohibition of social gatherings or participating in clubs or sporting events. The introduction of effective vaccines provided hope of returning to usual ways of operating, but the development of fast-spreading mutations (Omicron) led to a continuation of uncertainty.

The impetus for the research described in this paper was multi-faceted. Firstly, there was a desire to gather real time understanding of HE students’ response to learning during the pandemic, thus avoiding the way memories fade and change over time [7,8]. Previous research, from across the globe, relating to COVID-19 and online learning has predominantly focused on mental well-being/anxiety [9–13]. The main method of data collection being online surveys, with the questions being set by the researchers. Although these methods enable collection of data from large numbers of students as they are experiencing the COVID-19 situation, the researchers are asking questions about the aspects they identify as key issues. Thus, there is a lack of insight into the on-going reflexive experiences and issues that the participants consider to be of personal importance. It is with this in mind that this research took a fresh approach by asking students to shine a light on how the pandemic had affected their experience of HE. To give these silent voices a chance to be heard, we decided to put the participants at the centre of the research. However, to achieve this we still had to set the original research aim, questions, and justify the proposed methods of data collection (i.e., Photovoice [14]). Following this initial researcher-led phase, an application was made to the ERB to enable the interpretation and scope of the study to be established through how the student participants responded to the research, both as participants and co-researchers. By its very nature, participatory research, such as this

adapted Photovoice project, unfolds and develops in response to, and in negotiation with, the participants.

When completing the ethical documentation, as set out by the ERB, we were cognisant that this part of the university mechanism had to be, and is, tightly regulated. However, researchers in the social sciences, particularly when doing participatory research, can find it difficult to navigate the institution's ethical landscape. Whilst ethical codes are necessary to prevent harm, maintain dignity, respect, confidentiality, informed consent, integrity of research and so forth [15,16], the implementation of these codes are not always appropriate for a project that requires the research team to move with the ebb and flow of findings, debates and suggestions made by the participants (such as the participants/co-researchers suggesting recording their own voiceovers). At times, the pragmatic objective stance that the ERB seemed to hold in high esteem was seemingly at conflict with the nature of this type of participatory research [17]. As Harcourt and Quannerstedt [18] argued, and the ERB we were dealing with, informally acknowledged, this type of research can also be of benefit to both the researcher and participant because of the nature of dialogic discussion that can be stimulated. We chose to adopt the inclusive and defensible socially reciprocal approach [15] whilst wholeheartedly agreeing with, and adhering to, the core ethical principles as set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) [19]. As identified by Busher and Fox, the ERB's hypo-deductive stance was evident in some of the questions raised prior to approving the research. For example, they requested 'illustrative examples' of the images/pictures that participants might include and 'examples of typical discussion questions' when briefing and sharing the images they produced. This is contrary to our Photovoice approach, where participants were asked to generate visual and written (e.g., photo/voice) examples from their own experience without suggestions from researchers. This research had been preceded by a project using the same methodology with women discussing their experience of diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. This enabled us to provide the ERB with examples of how participants provide photos/words by referring them to a published paper about the methodological approach [20]. Full university-level ERB approval was gained in October 2020, at which point participant recruitment began. Usually in Photovoice projects, participants are provided with disposable digital cameras. However, the previous project [20] demonstrated that participants provided 'photos' in many formats—drawings, downloading from the internet, cutting out images from magazines, as well as using existing or newly created photos. We wanted to encourage that flexibility in this project.

In the Materials and Methods section below, we explore the second question set by Fox and Busher regarding the ways in which the ERB effectively supported us throughout the life of the study. This was especially pertinent to reflect on when pursuing a participatory study, using an adapted Photovoice methodology, which actively incorporated the suggestions of participants. We made conscious and frequent use of the mechanism of 'Chair's actions'. This enabled us to return to the ERB process (the revolving door) through a timely and effective manner which responded to the changes we encountered during the study. We circumnavigated the revolving door of participatory ethics through numerous addendums to the original ethical approval. Ultimately, this facilitated the participants to become co-researchers. They needed to have an informed understanding of the appropriateness of participatory ethical practices within the contextualised scenario (their learning experiences during lockdown in a HE institution) and a reciprocity in the ethical processes bound within an established educational institution. The subsequent dynamic relationship which developed between original research and an ERB could also ultimately inform future ethical regulations and policy, both on a national scale and on the international stage.

2. Materials and Methods

The requirement of ERBs is that researchers have to provide details of both the process and materials to be used prior to the commencement of research. This, in our opinion, is their biggest contribution to both research and researcher development [3]. The level

of detail regarding the proposed methods and the way in which data analysis is to be undertaken forces researchers, both neophytes and experienced, to consider how the research will develop. This helps to avoid unnecessarily wasting participants' time, and ensures that the data gathered is appropriate to the way in which it will be analysed and disseminated. The close scrutiny of how participants are to be recruited for the research and the issues around the information with which they will be provided offers a framework for researchers to consider their action and work both within the spirit and requirements of good ethical practice.

Participatory research values the contribution and representation of all those who opt into being, and meet the criteria to be, part of the research project [21]. This not only resonates with Wilson's [22] view that research should be done *with* and not *on* participants, but also it is this type of collaboration between researcher and participant that underpins our philosophical stance. For instance, Freire influenced the way in which the project developed [23]. We openly acknowledged, both within the research team and to participating students, that they had the most understanding of what it was to learn during the pandemic in an HE institution. Participants were asked to provide potential examples of images/photos and captions in briefing meetings and to lead the discussion of what they produced in the discussion meetings.

Photovoice, our chosen methodology, with its origins in action research [16], places participants at the centre of the data creation, and has been used in education [24] to understand young people's experience and develop self-advocacy skills [25]. It provides insight into young people's lives [26], thus empowering students to engage in fact-finding and solution generation [27]. This approach also involves an on-going cumulative process in which the researchers and participants learn from each other [20] and begin to understand each other's perspective. This iterative process can be more easily mapped through Lutz's [28] eight steps of Photovoice research, as depicted in Tables 1 and 2. This tabulation of research steps is not an attempt to systematically outline a repeatable method, but a means to unpick the ethical issues involved in each stage of this research. Table 1 below outlines the first five steps of Lutz's method of data collection. The later phases/stages (6–8) will be discussed through Table 2 later on in this paper. In this research, Lutz's Step 4 was omitted. This was a conscious decision to avoid leading participants, and encouraging and modelling that they are best placed to decide how and what to include and the visual representation along with using their words which describe it. Suggestions as to the type of images to be constructed were elicited from the participants in the briefing meeting when participants were encouraged to identify possible situations and captions they could produce.

Table 1. Participatory research through Photovoice.

Lutz's Eight Stages of Photovoice Research [28]	Researcher's Participation	Participants Engagement
1. Identification: Interrogation of known literature, and researcher self, to yield a research gap.	Identified the topic and research questions through literature review and reflections on personal experience.	N/A
2. Invitation: Invite perspective participants to join the study	Attended (synchronously and asynchronously) regular gatherings of the population we wanted to recruit.	Potential participants listen to and are invited to ask questions of the researchers (synchronously, face-to-face or via email). Voluntarily opt in to attending a briefing session.
3. Education: Talking to the participants.	Hosting a briefing meeting for prospective participants.	Participants reflect on examples of images and captions that relate to prompt.
4. Documentation: Prompting and modelling scenarios. Modelling by researchers was omitted in this research.	During the briefing, the participants shared their own examples of visual images. Participants were then independently invited to opt into the research at the end of the briefing.	Voluntarily opt into the research.

Table 1. Cont.

Lutz's Eight Stages of Photovoice Research [28]	Researcher's Participation	Participants Engagement
5. Narration Sharing of data	Researchers only prompt discussion when necessary, e.g., to begin the self-facilitating discussion.	Two weeks post-briefing the images/captions are used, as data, to elicit student descriptions and interpretation of the learning situation during lockdown.

Table 2. Participatory research through Photovoice—becoming co-researchers.

Lutz's Eight Stages of Photovoice Research Continued [28]	Researcher's Participation	Co-Researchers Engagement
6. Ideation: Data analysis	Scaffolding the analysis in accessible stages.	Identification of themes and verification exercise.
7. Presentation: Exhibition	Creating virtual and face-to-face exhibition spaces as a site of inquiry.	Formative feedback about exhibition space.
8. Confirmation: How those who attended the exhibition interpreted it	Small survey of visitors' perspectives.	Optional attendance.

The adapted Photovoice approach enabled the participants to be empowered to focus on and talk about their individual issues and generate potential solutions [27]. This, as in previous research [20], occurs because participants are free to discuss issues of importance to them, rather than potentially feeling coerced by researchers, through a more traditional set of formal interview techniques. This point was successfully argued when the ERB raised questions about the lack of a formal interview schedule.

Participants discussed how the issues raised resonated personally and with the wider societal setting [29]. This co-creation of research data was achieved by inviting the participants to construct their own images/captions that relate to their topic of choice.

In the research described in this paper, ethical considerations began prior to Stage 2 (in Table 1). In Stage 1, we placed ourselves in the participants' shoes, prior to any empirical data collection [22]. We actively reflected on potential ethical issues, such as undisclosed health issues relating to the pandemic. These were identified and contingencies considered. For example, if the student had lost a loved one to COVID-19, you could pragmatically direct them to internal (student wellbeing) and other external agencies (Mind.org) through the participant information sheet. This is a positive example of how the requirements in the ERB form can help researchers consider and avoid potential ethical pitfalls during the data gathering stage. This more pragmatic sharing of ethical details occurred during the introductory second stage of the research.

Included in this phase was the recruitment of numerous students through known channels, such as the student union and associated societies. This ensured inclusivity of those with different interests and values [19], and that all students would have the opportunity to be involved, if they so wished. The pandemic meant that students were not on campus so more traditional means of HE student recruitment using posters around campus were not available. We, therefore, used short-lived videos posted through these specified societies and, with the module lead and tutors' involvement, they were placed on virtual learning environments. The use of these short-lived videos was purposeful and reflected our need to be sensitive to any undisclosed ethical issues. Researchers also virtually attended gathering places, such as scheduled research method seminars to talk about the project and demystify the research process [30]. The placing of researchers, in front of potential participants, meant that the students could ask further questions, and began to unpick what they were being invited to do before they opted in to attending the

briefing to find out more. At this stage, we were acutely aware that our discussions with the students would need to remain neutral [31], to ensure no coercion took place. With this in mind, the briefing (Stage 3 in Table 1) was set up only after a critical period of reflection, at least 48 h after receiving the information sheet and privacy notice, and only after the students had independently contacted the researchers via email. This specific timeframe is one set by the ERB, and all researchers must comply within the institution if they are to be granted ethical approval. The rationale for this timeframe is not explained by the ERB, but is an example of potentially controlling the actions of researchers [8].

During the initial briefing (Stage 3, Table 1) which lasted approximately 30 min, the participants were invited to create their own pseudonyms (e.g., Katie, Terri, Bella and Armelle) [32], and to refer to each other using only these pseudonyms. During the briefing, there were opportunities for the students to ask further questions or clarify ideas about the types of images expected. A prompt was used, namely 'What comes to mind when you think about your learning experience during lockdown?' Participants were encouraged to share ideas and to think about potential images (Stage 4, Table 1). The researchers did not make any suggestions of their own, but encouraged participants to build upon and explore their own thoughts. There was no set format for the images/captions, other than that both aspects needed to be present. There was also not a requirement to provide a set number of images and the interpretation of what 'an image' was, was left for participants to decide. All suggestions of drawing, photos (existing and/or constructed) or downloaded from the internet or from media were seen as acceptable. Thus, with limited direction, the participants constructed their own images, with captions, to explore their personalised learning circumstances during the pandemic

Initially the researchers were concerned that the time taken to gain ethical approval (four months) would mean the opportunity to collect prospective data would be lost; however, the longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants has unpredictably extended our data collection period.

Between Stages 3 and 5 (Table 1), participants constructed their own images and captions. Two weeks post-briefing, the images/captions were shared between participants in small online zoom meetings. Ethically it was their decision which images they wanted to share with their research cohort. During the briefing, the researchers actively encouraged the participants to think about what they did/did not wish to share. This provided the participants with the time to reflect on what they were willing to disclose, and what they wished to keep private. After a briefing meeting, one participant decided not to participate further. No reason was asked/given for the decision, and in the interests of respecting participants, no further contact was made with the participant. By building in the space for participants to reflect, we believe that this mitigates against any potential coercion and/or regret on the part of participants that they have disclosed more than they would wish to do so.

From the outset of the project, we made it clear that we wanted to facilitate the research participants to create images/captions that could be disseminated once the project ended. This was mentioned verbally at all meetings attended by participants, as well as in the participant information sheet. They were also invited to sign a consent form confirming their agreement. Post-discussion, they were reminded that if they did not want their images/captions shared outside of the Zoom participant discussion meeting, then this was their choice.

It was during this Narration, Stage 5 of the research (Table 1), that the participants collaboratively made meaning from each other's data (images/captions) [28]. This is achieved through a participant-led discussion [20,33], but begins with the researcher asking if someone would like to share their image/caption. The participants then self-facilitate the discussion, with the researchers only contributing through checking any terms for clarity and to ensure that all members have an opportunity to contribute. Participants had full control of how much each individual wanted to contribute. They were reminded that they did not have to say anything if they did not wish to. This provided the participants with

greater control than interview and/or focus group situations where the researchers lead the questioning. It also adds a further layer of reflection in which participants can share and develop their thoughts/feelings/experiences of learning during the COVID-19 situation. Some of the participants were also educators, and there were occasions where there was a double hermeneutic in which they shared their teaching experiences and reflected on the similarities/differences between their own learning. Some commented that this gave them a potential insight into their own learners' experiences, thus gaining awareness into how they could support their own learners.

The scaffolded approach, described through Stages 1–5 above (Table 1), was a deliberate attempt to brief participants fully within the research process and ensure they understood what the research entailed. It also meant that they were independently leading the research by Stage 5, without continued prompts from the more experienced researchers. However, as Kesby stated, this does not mean all ethical responsibilities are dissolved [34]. In fact, our adapted Photovoice methodology highlighted how the power dynamics are more prominent through this approach. It made us more acutely aware of what we were inviting the students to do and how we were doing this. It was with this at the forefront of our minds that at every step we reminded the participants that they were free to withdraw from the research, along with their images/captions. After the first group discussion, Saskia (pseudonym) did just this without explanation, which was her ethical right. However, the rest of the participants seemingly became more and more empowered. As conversations developed, they started to make pragmatic suggestions about the dissemination of the research findings. This is despite the normal perceived power dynamic of the authoritative other, i.e., the researchers. However, their first recommendations only occurred after we invited them to be co-researchers and shared out plans for dissemination.

Some would say that ideation (or the data analysis stage) begins when the participants select their images/captions [16], but what is undeniable is that when they shared their experiences, the participants started to identify recurring themes [28]. Subsequent analysis of the full transcription of the discussion has in the past fallen to the researcher; however, in this research, the participants at the end of Stage 5 were invited to opt in to involvement in the data analysis stage. It was felt that using students as co-researchers was in keeping with the philosophical underpinning of the Photovoice methodology, namely, enabling them to critically engage reflective thinking and problem solving [27] and reflecting Freire's [23] opinion that participants are uniquely situated to provide a deeper layer of insight into their own position—in this research of being HE learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, participants became central to the data analysis. We identified those participants, who wanted to undertake the analysis independently of the researchers and invited them to a subsequently training session to familiarize them with an abridged process of Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Framework [35]. This provided appropriate levels of scaffolding and is suitable for use by novice researchers. Using a section of the transcript, the participants were provided with an overview of the stages of the thematic analysis [35]:

- Individually reading the transcript;
- Generating initial codes (by highlighting particular phrases from the transcript);
- Using a colour to identify and generate themes, by grouping the identified codes from the previous step.

Following the training, the fully transcribed pseudonymised discussion (originally recorded from Stage 5) was emailed to the three new co-researchers. They familiarised themselves with the transcripts individually, then applied the Braun and Clarke framework to code interesting features systematically and generate initial themes from these codes. After a week, they were invited to a Zoom meeting to discuss and verify their individual themes through a further conversation. One of the participants, Vanessa, shared their transcript through the Zoom platform and the others overlaid their interpretations (See example in the Results section). The codes of: Students' emotional response, Time passing, and Perseverance were agreed by the participants through the use of identifying specific images and words, used both as captions and from the discussion to exemplify the codes.

These are discussed in more detail in the Results section. Again, the researchers listened to the discussion without contributing to the process.

During this verification exercise, the students also became central to creating dissemination activities, Stage 7 in Table 2. For example, they wished to contribute to an online discussion, at an internal university research methods conference (using the pseudonyms and with their cameras turned off). They wanted to describe their views about being involved in developing the themes. Thus, they had become part of a central role in all aspects of the research process, from data creation through to dissemination, with the researchers acknowledging the value of the participants', or co-researchers, lived-experience.

The transition from participant to co-researcher, through Lutz's Photovoice methodology [28], posed a number of ethical questions. Some of these were covered in the forms required as part of ERB approval, some at the meetings with participants, and some at review/reflection meetings among the researchers. The first ethical question was with regards to the use of faces in images produced. These would only be used if accompanied with a signed model release form, as recommended by the Photovoice.org [36], and included in the ERB application and participant information forms. Table 2, Stage 7, identifies the exhibition element that we had envisaged from the outset. This was perceived as a website that was password protected, to prevent open access by the general public with the potential issues relating to a lack of control of how information is shared on the Internet [19]. To add depth to the images/captions produced by the participants, we wanted to accompany the images with a voiceover narrated by one of the researchers. While this approach was acceptable to the ERB, a number of the co-researchers suggested that they wanted their voices to accompany their images/captions. This had not been approved by the ERB in the original ethics application and posed the potential for identification and loss of confidentiality should voices be recognised. However, as a participatory research method, we were pleased that the participants felt empowered, and agentive, enough to want to provide feedback on not just the virtual exhibition space, but also to be actively involved in it. As part of the ERB process, we were able to complete a Chair's action. This process allows for researchers to complete a change notification with justification, which can be approved by the Chair of the ERB without recourse to the full committee. We used our networks to identify another project in which participants' voices had been used to strengthen our approach to the ERB. In addition to completing a request for an amendment form, the participant information sheet needed updating and an additional consent box to the consent form added, ready for the participants to countersign. We were embracing 'the revolving door of ethics', and when other such similar situations were encountered, we returned to this process. The entire process, from completing the required form to gaining approval, took seven days. This is an example of how the ERB process can be flexible and supportive of researchers when they encounter unexpected issues in the field. Without the supportive response of the ERB process, we could have been left with a major ethical dilemma: Did we reject the participants' reasonable requests so that we acted within our ethical approval, or did we accede to the participants' request and potentially be in breach of our ethical approval? As Busher and Fox [3] discuss, when ethical approval processes lack flexibility, or when researchers perceive that they do, then the procedures and processes will dominate the research process. We have been fortunate to have the confidence, and expertise, in approaching the ERB to make a further five amendments. Although this has required additional forms to be created and researcher time, it has meant that perhaps by sharing our experiences with other researchers both within our university and our wider networks, we can contribute to the importance of seeing ethical approval as an ongoing process during the lifetime of a project. This is particularly the case for participative projects with agentive and actively contributing participants.

Whilst this paper focuses on the dynamic ethical processes that can help facilitate participatory research, such as Photovoice, the nature of the research provided the participants with a powerful tool to not only speak about a potentially sensitive subject, but also a means of documenting and narrating visual elements of their own lives on their own

terms [28], without influence from external others. They were afforded the opportunity to come together as a community of students and discuss how their images and thinking resonated with one another. It is with this in mind that we want to share some of the findings from our project. In the Discussion section, we will return to summarising our responses to the three questions which Fox and Busher outlined.

3. Results

Images and captions created by the participants proved to be powerful tools to elicit further contextualised discussion that resonated around the topic of learning, in HE, during lockdown. In this section, we examine the individual construction of images/captions, as explored through the way in which the adapted Photovoice methodology was enacted. This includes a small section of one of the group transcripts, to exemplify their shared experiences of learning during COVID-19. An extract from the co-researchers' application of Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Framework illustrates how this formed the basis of discussion with two other students, who had also read and reviewed the transcript to identify three key themes.

As part of the small group discussion between three student participants (Vanessa, Saskia and Kate), one undergraduate student participant (Vanessa) felt empowered to narrate her experience through a set of four photographs. She gave each image a title (Figure 1). The caption she created can be found below (see quotation).

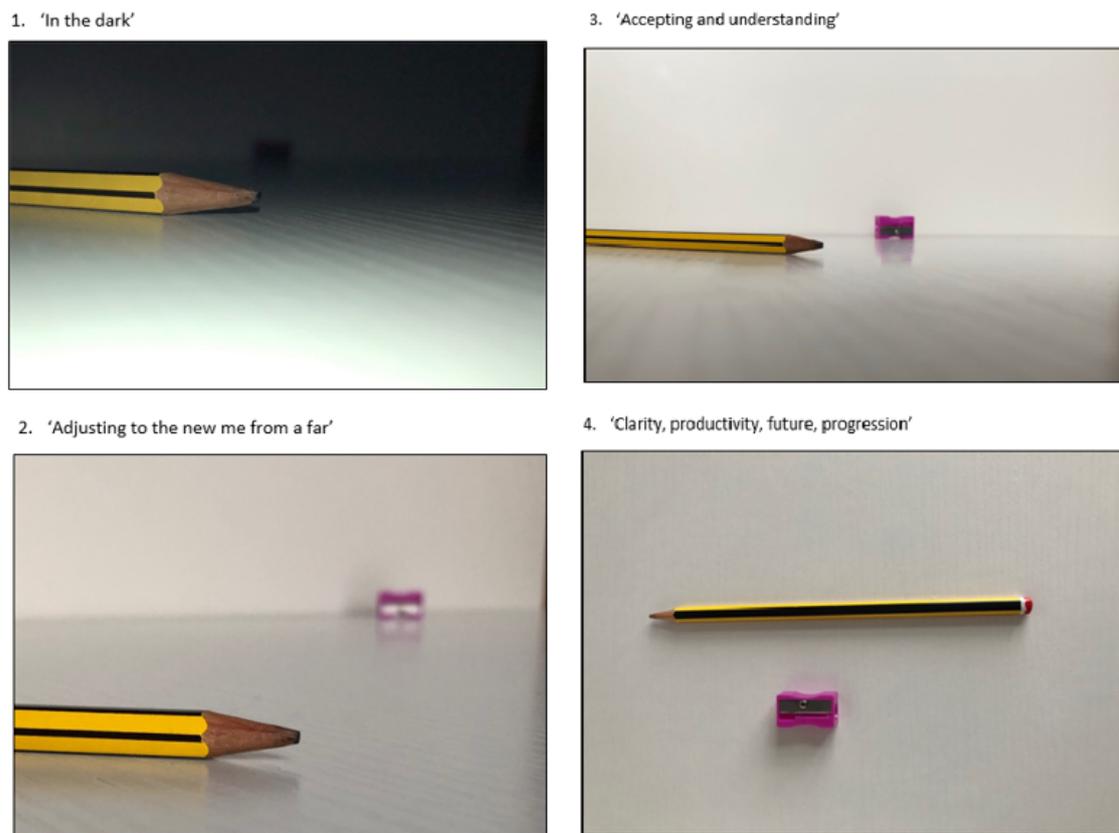


Figure 1. A quantage of images (1)–(4) created by Vanessa to capture how she felt about learning in higher education (HE) during lockdown.

“The blunt pencil represents me and how ‘dull’ the COVID-19 experience had made me feel. Although obscured, there is a sharpener in the darkness which represents ‘hope’ and the tools that will get me ‘sharpened’- to my pre-COVID-19 mettlesome mindset. As the pictures progress the sharpener becomes clearer and appears to give the perspective of getting closer to the pencil. This is representa-

tive of me, gradually adjusting to the ‘new norm’. In the last image the pencil has still not used the sharpener. This is representative of the fact I am continuously adjusting and even though I am close, depending on the day and my fluctuating perspective, I am still not ‘sharp’ yet, although I know that one day, I will be”.

In response to this narrative and the images, Saskia suggested, that they were “...like a process in a way . . . I guess it could be dependent on how you’re feeling that day as to which picture [out of the four] you feel most connected to.” It was reflecting on Saskia’s comment that Vanessa acknowledged the somewhat linear nature of these four images did not resonate with her undulating feelings too. She concurred by stating, “I feel like you said, we kind of go through highs and lows, so yeah, I agree.” Thus, through the interactive dialogue, generated by the images [24] and captions, the participants learn that they are not alone, but part of a wider community who are experiencing similar thoughts and feelings. In the same group, Kate’s image (Figure 2) contains a speech bubble with the words ‘low battery’ written inside.



Figure 2. Kate’s hand-drawn image entitled, “A snapshot of a student’s mind who is learning during COVID-19”.

Kate referred to ‘energy levels’ and Saskia mentioned the need to keep ‘adjusting and recharging ourselves.’ This analogy of the lockdown situation also resonated with Vanessa who reportedly ‘ . . . found it more draining being at home than socialising at uni [sic].’ This mutual bonding over a shared experience developed into further themes. The three students in the discussion were aware of the passing of time and how the pandemic was slowing their progress. Saskia stated that,

“ . . . this [COVID-19] is slightly holding me back. But it’s not permanent. I know that eventually this rope is going to get thinner and thinner and then it’s just going to break and I’m going to be able to achieve. But this isn’t far away because it’s not stopping me. It’s just making processes slower”.

The rope Saskia is describing was illustrated as holding her back, in her pencil drawing, but her arms were outstretched as she walked doggedly forward towards her books, away from the COVID-19 virus she had drawn. In contrast, others felt more pressure to get things done now they were permanently at home.

In another group, these themes were echoed by Armelle, when she described her predicament:

“I have a pile of books that I want to read, fiction, but I’ve not touched [them] because there’s a bit of pressure that you have to be super productive because you’re at home. You have more time. You’re not commuting, you have to be super productive and spend more time reading”.

Despite this contradiction, the perseverance of these student’s shone through. Note Saskia’s determination as her arms were outstretched towards her academic reading. There was even confidence and implied rebellion behind the students’ resolve to keep going. As taken up by Terri, in the same group as Armelle: ‘ . . . but it’s at those times of adversity [during lockdown] that I felt most challenged. I will push myself through this situation. But it’s when I don’t have those times . . . I am more laid back and I can feel that and I miss it. If I’m honest with you, I don’t like drama. I don’t want drama. But I miss the drive if that makes sense.’

Armelle responded to this comment wholeheartedly:

“I know what you mean. And actually on top of that as well, if I had a Wonder Woman or Superwoman costume not to big myself up, I probably would have done something with that . . . I’ve become much stronger. I do feel like I can do ten research proposals.”

It is through the interaction between Terri and Armelle that the implied defiant nature turned into a superpower.

By inviting the participants to become co-researchers in the analysis of the data, using the Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis Framework [35], they identified three themes: Students emotional response; Passing of time; and Persistence. Figure 3 indicates how these developed.

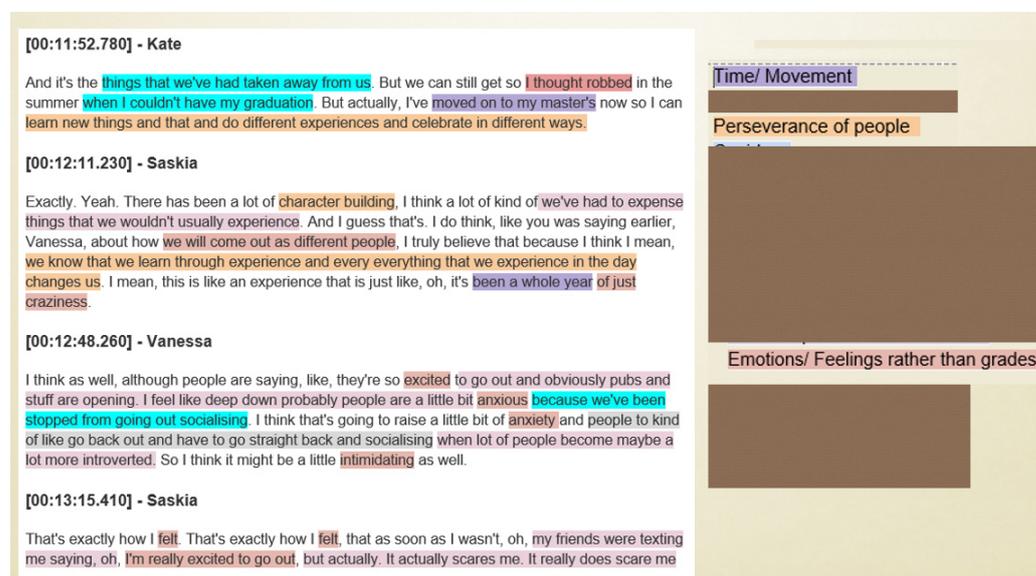


Figure 3. A small illustrative snapshot of Vanessa’s thematic analysis of the fully transcribed discussion.

This was based initially on Vanessa individually using Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis which she then shared, via Zoom, in discussion with her co-researchers, Saskia and Kate. Notice the three core themes in Vanessa’s key (right hand side, Figure 3) that have emerged from the participants’ discussion and the number of times they are highlighted in the text.

It seems that the participative and agentic nature in which the participants interpreted the broad question as to how they ‘learned during COVID-19’ has produced data which is potentially more personal and insightful than through other methods. We would argue that, although it may feel difficult to researchers to review and negotiate with the ERB requirements and practices, the effort is well worth it. This point is taken up in more detail in the Discussion section below.

4. Discussion

In this section, we review in turn the three questions set by Fox and Busher in the light of the way in which our research project gained and maintained ongoing ethical approval. This is juxtaposed against our reflections of this experience. We incorporate the lessons that may be applicable to the wider international context. This is done in light of the way in which ERBs can predominantly be informed by a systematic hypothetico-deductive approach.

4.1. What Are Appropriate and Effective Ethical Appraisal and Approval Practices for Particular Contexts?

At the start of this paper, we noted that the focus of ERBs grew out of the need to protect participants from potentially exploitative and harmful processes [1–3] which, it argued, did not respect human rights or dignity and disadvantaged potentially less powerful groups of people. This developed further into reputational concerns of universities in the light of increasing marketisation [8], which to some extent followed the Foucaultian stance of controlling researchers to be more compliant with the requirements of ERBs [37]. This is in contrast to encouraging researchers to take more personal responsibility for their research [18] and how ERB processes have developed. In times when most research was based on the biomedical model, with randomised controlled trials seen as the gold standard and the need to control variables and maintain standardised processes throughout the research method was the priority [38], the need for ERBs to ensure uniformity and protect participants from ‘harm’ (however that is defined) made logical and ethical sense.

In the context of educational research, as conducted with HE students through an adapted Photovoice methodology, this paper supports the case for a more collaborative approach between ERBs, researchers and participants [39]. At the heart of our research [16,23] is the view that participants are knowledgeable others and the invitation to become co-researchers forms a key component of what constitutes ethical appraisal and practices. In the initial negotiations with our ERB, we acknowledged the important role that ERBs play in requiring researchers to reflectively think thoroughly about all elements of the research process, from the original impetus for the project, through to its dissemination. This includes, prior to ethical approval, negotiating, at the faculty level, why this research was worthwhile. It was acknowledged that Photovoice would provide a unique insight into HE learning during the pandemic, not only because in the initial stages of the pandemic there was a rush to capture students’ perspectives, by using questionnaires designed and interpreted by researchers [5], but also because we were inviting participants to become co-researchers. Both of these elements were seen by the ERB as a fresh approach. This would likely lead to the deeper insight about how HE students were personally dealing with the unprecedented conditions that had been imposed. For example, this research has identified the distorted way in which time has been seen and used, as well as the high levels of perseverance displayed both individually and collectively by the students who participated.

4.2. How Can Institutional Ethics Committees Effectively Support Educational Researchers and Educational Research throughout the Life of a Study, Especially those Pursuing a Broad Range of Critical and Participatory Studies?

In the initial setting up of this project, the formal requirements of the ERB, with regard to justifying the need for the study, how participants would be recruited, the procedures and processes throughout data gathering, analysis and gaining ‘informed’ consent, were

invaluable. The process of challenging the rationale for the Photovoice method and making best use of the participants' time ensured respect for the participants.

In participatory qualitative research, all eventualities are unlikely to be identified in advance (43) and there is an understandable concern by researchers that ERBs may require the identification of potential difficulties before providing ethical approval. An example of successfully negotiating such an occurrence in our research included when the co-researchers wanted to narrate their own voice-overs. The ERB had not initially approved this (an 'anonymity' issue), but the way in which we were able to approach and renegotiate such situations, through the Chair's Approval process, developed our confidence in overcoming potential feelings of docility [3]. The ERB's recognition and acceptance of the requests initiated by participants is arguably an indication that they had come to respect and support participants' views and wishes, in the same way as the original researchers. This was further supported by the timely way in which our requests were acted upon (seven days) so that the momentum of the research could be maintained. This was in contrast to the slow initial approval process of four months.

Perhaps one of the key aspects that needs to develop between ERBs and researchers, using participatory and critical approaches, is the development of more open channels of communication outside the formal ERB processes. We have been fortunate in that, as researchers on this project, one is an active member of the ERB committee, and another has experience of gaining ethical approval for a range of research projects using participatory methods. Such things can add, perhaps, to our reputation as 'ethical and moral researchers' and to our confidence when approaching ethical boards post approval. However, having demonstrated our willingness to revisit the details of ethical approval, through not only our experience with our co-researchers, but also by justifying these addendums through published research literature, as the project progressed, the level of collaboration between the ERB and researchers developed. In the longer term, it may be likely that all parties benefit from developing just such a relationship.

4.3. How Do Authors' Reflections on their Experiences Relate to a Wider International Context for Ethical Practice and Regulation?

While there is an understandable need for all research to comply with the systematic requirements of ERBs, perhaps now is the time to reflect on the changing landscape in which research takes place. Our reflections include how the context of ethical practice and regulation need to take account of the way in which research takes place and the changing concept of 'anonymity' and 'agency' in a world of smart phones and easy global access to the internet. It also needs to consider the increasingly active role that participants play in research, rather than the potentially passive and subordinate role they once played when ERBs were set up and the first ethical guidelines were established.

It may be somewhat paternalistic for ERBs to identify ways in which participants need to be protected. Our experience demonstrated that the participants in this research wanted their voices to be heard in the narrations of their own images and captions. In the same way, during the dissemination element, participants suggested that they would be willing to attend conference presentations and share their experiences of participation rather than having it filtered through the researchers. This participatory agency resonates with our plans for those participants who volunteered to undertake the subsequent analysis to become co-researchers. This is in keeping with the spirit of participatory action research and, more specifically, Photovoice. As Busher and Fox [3] suggest, particularly research involving students in HE institutions need to be considered as co-constructors of knowledge rather than needing the full protection of ERBs. This may not be the case in all research, but it is something that both researchers and ERBs should reflectively consider.

In the research discussed in this paper, we recognise the agentic nature of participants in participatory research. While there is certainly a need for ERBs, perhaps the time has come for them, and us, to be part of a collaborative process to discuss ideas and to only use the ethical approval forms as a framework for developing research rather than a static

directive that needs to be completed appropriately and post-approval adhered to. If this is to happen, then ERBs will need to include members experienced in the use of qualitative and participatory methods as a way of ensuring understanding and acknowledgement of the value of critical and participatory studies in educational research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.C. and S.F.; methodology, C.C.; validation, C.C., S.F. and K.W.P.; formal analysis, C.C., S.F. and K.W.P.; investigation, C.C., S.F. and K.W.P.; resources, C.C.; data curation, S.F.; writing—original draft preparation, C.C., S.F. and K.W.P.; writing—review and editing, C.C., S.F. and K.W.P.; visualization, S.F.; supervision, C.C.; project administration, C.C. and S.F.; funding acquisition, C.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF), 12 March 2021.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Oxford Brookes University UREC Approval No: 201414.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to issues of consent and confidentiality.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Milgram, S. A behavioural study of obedience. *J. Abnorm. Soc. Psychol.* **1963**, *67*, 371–378. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zimbardo, P.G. On the ethics of intervention in human psychological research with special reference to the Stanford Prison Experiment. *Cognition* **1973**, *2*, 243–256. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Busher, H.; Fox, A. The amoral academy? A critical discussion of research ethics in the neo-liberal university. *Educ. Philos. Theory* **2021**, *53*, 469–478. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wang, C.; Zhao, H. The Impact of COVID-19 on Anxiety in Chinese University Students. *Front. Psychol.* **2020**, *11*, 1168. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Thorp, H. Suspend tests and rankings. *Science* **2020**, *368*, 797. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Ebrahim, A. Coronavirus: University Freshers ‘Robbed of Experience’. *BBC News*. 26 May 2020. Available online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-52760275/coronavirus-university-freshers-robbed-of-experience> (accessed on 10 December 2021).
- Bradfield Douglass, A.; Steblay, N. Memory distortion in eyewitnesses: A meta-analysis of the postidentification feedback effect. *Appl. Cogn. Psychol.* **2006**, *2*, 859–869. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Uttl, B.; White, C.; Cnudde, K.; Grant, L. Prospective memory, retrospective memory, and individual differences in cognitive abilities, personality, and psychopathology. *PLoS ONE* **2018**, *13*, e0193806. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Cao, W.; Fang, Z.; Hou, G.; Han, M.; Xu, X.; Dong, J.; Zheng, J. The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry Res.* **2020**, *287*, 112934. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Odrizola-González, P.; Planchuelo-Gómez, Á.; Iruirtia, M.J.; de Luis-García, R. Psychological effects of the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown among students and workers of a Spanish university. *Psychiatry Res.* **2020**, *290*, 113108. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Rakhmanov, O.; Dane, S. Knowledge and anxiety levels of African university students against COVID-19 during the pandemic outbreak by an online survey. *J. Res. Med. Dent. Sci.* **2020**, *8*, 53–56.
- Reznik, A.; Gritsenko, V.; Konstantinov, V.; Khamenka, N.; Isralowitz, R. COVID-19 fear in Eastern Europe: Validation of the Fear of COVID-19 Scale. *Int. J. Ment. Health Addict.* **2020**, *19*, 1903–1908. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Tang, Y.W.; Schmitz, J.E.; Persing, D.H.; Stratton, C.W. Laboratory Diagnosis of COVID-19: Current Issues and Challenges. *J. Clin. Microbiol.* **2020**, *58*, e00512–20. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wang, C.; Burris, M. Photovoice: Concept, Methodology and use for participatory assessment needs. *Health Educ. Behav.* **1997**, *24*, 369–387. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Brown, C.; Spiro, J.; Quinton, S. The role of research ethics committees: Friend or foe in educational research? An exploratory study. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2019**, *46*, 747–769. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Durham Community Research Team. *Community-Based Participatory Research: Ethical Challenges*; Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University: Durham, UK, 2011.
- Rose, G. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th ed.; SAGE: London, UK, 2016.
- Harcourt, D.; Quennerstedt, A. Ethical Guardrails When Children Participate in Research: Risk and Practice in Sweden and Australia. *SAGE Open* **2014**, *4*, 2158244014543782. [[CrossRef](#)]
- BERA's. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 4th ed.; BERA: London, UK, 2018; Available online: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online> (accessed on 28 November 2021).

20. Capewell, C.; Ralph, S.; Symonds, M. Listening to womens' voices: Using an adapted Photovoice methodology to access their emotional responses to diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. *J. Patient Exp.* **2020**, *7*, 1316–1323. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Van Mechelen, M.; Baykal, G.E.; Dindler, C.; Eriksson, E.; Iversen, O.S. 18 Years of Ethics in Child-Computer Interaction Research: A Systematic Literature Review. In Proceedings of the ACM Interaction Design and Children (IDC) Conference 2020, London, UK, 10 June 2020.
22. Wilson, M. Ethical Considerations. In *MasterClass in Geography Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning*; Butt, G., Ed.; Bloomsbury: London, UK, 2015.
23. Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Continuum: New York, NY, USA, 2000.
24. Delgado, M. *Urban Youth and Photovoice: Visual Ethnography in Action*; OUP: Oxford, UK, 2015.
25. Williams, J.; Greenleaf, A.; Barnes, E.; Owens, T. Photovoice as a teaching tool for client/student advocacy. *J. Couns. Leadersh. Advocacy* **2016**, *3*, 111–123. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Blackman, A. *The PhotoVoice Manual: A Guide to Designing and Running Participatory Photography Projects*; KNI Press: London, UK, 2007.
27. Shor, I. *Empowering Education*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1992.
28. Latz, A.O. *Photovoice Research in Education and Beyond: A Practical Guide from Theory to Exhibition*; Routledge: London, UK, 2017.
29. Thomas, G. *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*, 2nd ed.; SAGE: London, UK, 2017.
30. Simpson, S.H. Demystifying the research process: Mixed methods. *Pediatr. Nurs.* **2011**, *37*, 28–29.
31. Denzin, N.K.; Lincoln, Y.S. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed.; SAGE: London, UK, 1994.
32. Archer, L.; DeWitt, J. *Understanding Young People's Science Aspirations: How Students Form Ideas about 'Becoming a Scientist'*; Routledge: London, UK, 2016.
33. Capewell, C. From ears to experience: Insights into living with long-term glue ear. *CORERJ Camb. Open-Rev. Educ. Res. e-J.* **2014**, *1*, 40–58.
34. Kesby, M. Participatory diagramming: Deploying qualitative methods through an action research epistemology. *Area* **2000**, *32*, 423–435. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* **2006**, *3*, 77–101. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Photovoice. PhotoVoice Statement of Ethical Practice. 2020. Available online: <https://photovoice.org/about-us/photovoice-statement-of-ethical-practice/> (accessed on 20 November 2021).
37. Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; Allen and Unwin: London, UK, 1977.
38. Guba, E.G.; Lincoln, Y.S. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed.; Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., Eds.; SAGE: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1994; pp. 105–117.
39. Brady, N. From 'moral loss' to 'moral reconstruction'? A critique of ethical perspectives on challenging the neoliberal hegemony in UK universities in the 21st century. *Oxf. Rev. Educ.* **2012**, *38*, 343–355. [[CrossRef](#)]