Studying dreams, plans and realities of university students about to graduate: experimenting with visual methods & empathy-based stories

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Content & structure

✓ Premises of the research: *From University to Life: Generalists and ‘decent’ life;*

✓ Research questions;

✓ Quest for answers: visual and narrative methods;

✓ Preliminary results from Finland & tasters from Spain

✓ Methodological pros and cons
The Crisis: the “new lost generation”

‘For the graduate without a future is a human expression of an economic problem: the west’s model is broken. It cannot deliver enough high-value work for its highly educated workforce’ (Paul Mason).

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/01/graduates-2012-survive-in-cracks-economy
Europe 2020 Strategy, Youth & Model of Life

What is expected from the European youth?

- Have a high education and graduate swiftly;
- Proceed quickly to the flexible labour markets and become a ‘lifelong learning professional’;
- Become an entrepreneur or be mobile i.e. willing and able to move around the EU as job/career opportunities arise;
- Stay economically active and fit for work as long as possible
Research questions

- What university students think and how they feel about their education, work life and their own transition from university to work and life?

- What do they think about ‘decent’ life?

- Do students’ dreams and plans for life correspond in any way with the model of life put forward by the Europe 2020 strategy?
Innovative and creative methods

Methodology is about:
✓ How to gather and develop knowledge about the social world;
✓ Exploring how people think about, understand and reflect their own identities and their relations with the social world

Creative methods:

enable people to communicate in a meaningful way about their identities and experiences and their own thoughts about their identities and experiences through creatively making things themselves, and then reflecting upon what they have made.

Use of pictures

✓ Evoke memories;

✓ Facilitate ‘mental’ moving between past, present and future;

✓ Help to think and create new ways of seeing; generates new perspectives and questions

“What is important with the images is not simply the image itself, but how it is seen by particular spectators who look in particular ways.” (M. Sturken & L. Cartwright (2009) *Practices of Looking* quoted in Gillian Rose (2012, 13).)
Emphaty-based-stories

- Are short, imaginary writing composed according to an introductory script provided by the researcher.
- Are not necessarily descriptions of reality, but possible stories about what may happen and what different things mean.

- Provide research participants with the opportunity to use their own voice;
- Spark people’s imagination to make tacit (silent & implicit) knowledge visible;

- Value in collecting contextual and timely bound cultural meanings;
- Help to find new perspectives and inventing hypothesis;
Transition from education to work: Preliminary results from Finland

Assignment 1

“Choose a picture that describes or reflects your thoughts and feelings that finishing studies and moving into work life evokes in you.”

- Give picture a title or caption;
- Write why you chose the picture, what it means to you, what is in it and what kind of feelings it evokes;
- Information about the origins of the picture

Assignment 2

“Imagine that you have graduated from the university three years ago. You are in work life. Empathize with the situation, use your imagination and tell what kind of work you do. Imagine and describe how your university education benefits you in your work.”

- Write a story (min 1-2 pages)
Pictures attached to the texts (assignment 1) are removed due to copyright issues.

“Starry sky is the name for this situation where we are at the moment; pursuing a new life before us – this has a feel of anticipation.”

The mistress of knowledge. “Even though the mistress of knowledge knows that she masters her steps and has trained for years to manage the bata de cola dress, there is always a risk of stumbling and injuring herself. Yet, the dance must go on.”

A man and a wind-swept arse. “Because of the vibes in Finland, I would like to move abroad to work or study (eyes on the sea). The man’s dress reflects the grotesqueness that prevails in the cultural field and how it affects your identity because the work you get to do is not what it supposed be.”

The Wait. “I chose this picture visually; it is an empty view with some things that catch your eye but are a bit out of focus. There are rails, trains and buildings but the train hasn’t yet arrived in my platform and it is somewhat unclear what is my relationship with the rails, trains and buildings.”
The four ‘career types’ based on the preliminary analysis of the empathy-based stories (assignment 2)

1. Traditional official/bureucrat

- Experts in social and cultural sectors → public sector
- Own office
- Working hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.; long holidays + possibility to short work time
- Fixed monthly salary
- Work remains at the work place; good work community and atmosphere
2. Organization worker

• Expert in projects within a large organization → NGOs

• Semi-fixed working hours; “so that working overtime is not the rule”

• Salary equivalent to the education; “so that you’ll get on nicely”

• International cooperation; varying duties; team work; a good work community and atmosphere
3. Decision-maker

- Visionary, problem solver, expert
  → public sector, politics, entrepreneur

- Works in Finland, Scandinavia, Brussels, European Union

- Independent work, wide networks, work central in life
4. Freelancer

- Producer, content provider, teacher, event organizer
  → cultural sector + education & training
  Doctoral studies and research

- Multiple employers, contracts & assignments; short-term projects

- Work is done in projects, gigs and temporary jobs in Finland and abroad

- Self-satisfaction, creativity, challenging & rewarding jobs/assignments
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dreams, plans and reality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>It would be nice</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ to have balance between work and life</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ to do meaningful work with important issues (equality, human rights, multiculturalism, environment, art and culture, science) in a good work community</td>
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<td>✓ to have secure income</td>
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<td><strong>I plan of</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ being an expert in public sector, or in NGO’s and other organizations</td>
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<td>✓ doing tasks/assignments that may change and vary and include international ‘parts’ and ‘periods’</td>
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<td>✓ being able to organize my work so that it has clear boundaries and timetables</td>
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<td>✓ having stability of social life and relationships:</td>
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<td>✓ investing in personal development</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>I am afraid</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ settle for short-term assignments, projects, mix of jobs</td>
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<td>✓ work is constant applying of funding and inventing your career</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ work is too burdensome, too demanding and exhausting</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ huge contradictions between different spheres of life and their demands</td>
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Tasters from data collected in Spain in April 2015

**Business has no limits**

- When you look at this picture you can see a man in a suit with earth in front of him and many recognizable structures to indicate countries and he’s holding a pen drawing what and where he wants. My goal is to be like this person in the picture, with no boundaries or no limits to my business because no matter how big we think the world is one world and one human kind living on it, we share earth, water, air and I want to be part of that business. A hostel in Peru, a flat in Barcelona, a construction store in Palestine and a small coffee shop in Turkey...
Free fall

This picture shows some friends jumping together in unknown water. Before the scene they were standing together on the edge of the cliff, maybe holding hands. The water in front of them is deep and they don’t know what’s underneath. The cliff is really comfortable. This is how I experience university- I feel supported and I stand with two feet on the ground...but thinking about the whole application process for a job makes me feel like I am jumping off my safe cliff. And I don’t question the jump because my friends are with me but in the air I cannot hold their hands, I have to make my own decisions. I am not afraid of not getting a job. I am more afraid of not taking the right path at the right time and maybe miss a great change.
I am now on “the rock” (Uni) and all I have in front of me is the future...I see the future full of opportunities but...You can try to build a bridge or jump hoping that you’ll not get hurt...Lucky people jump and they arrive to the place they want, they have a parachute (money). Then there are people like me who have to build their own bridge (e.g. uni degree & diplomas). The problem is that in this country the building materials are expensive and resources are lacking. This is why having people you trust and love by your side is useful because they can help you to build the bridge or prevent you from falling.

The sky is cloudy and that is how I see my future; I do not see it brilliant, nor disastrous. And just like weather, it changes depending on the day and it is difficult to predict it accurately.
The good & the challenging

- **Pictures** brings out emotions and empathy;
- **Empathy-based stories** provided analythical essays following academic conventions

- **Context sensitivity**: how the physical context of data collection affects the data you get? To whom did students write their stories; to themselves or to a researcher/teacher and what bearing it has on the data?
- **Traget group sensitivy**: university students are trained to be knowledge workers and experts – must be taken into account in further development of methods and assignment instructions.

**Afterword**

The current generation of university students in Europe or elsewhere are by no means lost. They have plans, dreams, abilities, skills and common sense!

See poem *Lost generation* by Jonathan Reed (speaker: Brooke Wojdynski)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRG4ySdi_aE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRG4ySdi_aE)
**Sources & references**

- Mason, Paul: ‘The graduates of 2012 will survive only in the cracks of our economy’, The Guardian, 1.7.2012: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1KCDGPyqLc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1KCDGPyqLc) (Europe’s Bleak Economy Spawns Lost generation – CBN.com)