

Investigating approaches to teaching artwork interpretation in culturally and linguistically diverse senior school visual arts classrooms

Abstract

The proposed research seeks to investigate the struggles of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) learners enrolled in Western Australian senior school Visual Arts courses when tasked with the analysis of unfamiliar artworks in the Responding component of the course. These challenges remain entrenched for CALD learners, as evidenced in the lack of research on successful strategies used to support these learners in their interpretation of culturally situated visual phenomena, such as the Western-European and Indigenous Australian artworks typically privileged for examination. Accordingly, this research aims to address these challenges by revealing effective strategies used by experienced visual arts educators working in CALD schools to support student acquisition of visual literacies and interpretive skills. To reveal the rich insights of these experienced educators, a mixed-methods Arts-Based Education Research (ABER) design will be used to access discursive and visual data that captures their struggles and successes in navigating this educational issue. It is envisaged that this non-traditional research output will provide evocative insights into educator experiences and reveal workable strategies that other visual arts educators can learn from to better support CALD learner success in visual arts responding tasks.

Background

The university entrance Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR) Visual Arts courses for Year 11 and 12 students in Western Australia are academically rigorous, however, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students can find the challenges of these courses significant. Two equally weighted components form the ATAR Visual Arts course: *Arts Making* (practical) and *Arts Responding* (written), with proficiency expected in both domains (SCSA, 2017). Arts Responding is generally concerned with the analysis of set artworks and discussions on contextual influences on an artist's practice. This combination of written, oral and analytical-interpretive capabilities are sites of often-overlooked struggle for CALD students, particularly where English is not their native language and their contextual interpretation of visual imagery is informed by their home country and not the context of the images selected for analysis. These struggles quickly compound when considered alongside findings that most Australian graduate educators are ill-prepared to meet the needs of English language learners (Gilmour, et al., 2018). Moreover, early career arts educators (1 – 5 years of practice) often lack effective skills and strategies for teaching the Responding component of the Visual Arts course (Paris, 2008). The lack of research on effective strategies to support diverse learner needs is significant when considered against Australia's multi and transcultural demographic.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, immigrants made up 20% of Australia's population in the 1980s (ABS, 2010). By 2016, approximately 49% of Australians were either first or second-generation immigrants, with over 300 distinct languages spoken in homes across Australia (ABS, 2017). This trend has continued relatively unabated till the present period, suggesting that Australia is becoming increasingly diverse. Moreover, survey data from the 2016 census similarly revealed that Western Australia was home to the highest population of first-generation immigrants (ABS, 2021), further indicating that Australia's cultural demographic is no longer homogenous. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that educational practices need to adapt to reflect and accommodate the needs of a diverse cohort of learners.

Approaches to Arts Responding and interpretation

Despite evident changes in Australia's population, the delivery and content of Arts Responding does not appear to have adapted significantly in recent decades. Arts Responding functions to demonstrate the perceived academic rigour of visual arts courses in the university entrance pathway (Boughton, 1989; Morris, 2015) and as such, Australian visual arts courses since the late 1980s have adopted an equal weighting for *Responding* and *Making*. In 2014, this equal weighting was framed as Strands, namely *Art Interpretation* and *Art Making*, under the Visual Arts Course of Study (VACoS) (Stephens, 2006). The VACoS later became known as ATAR Visual Arts in 2015 with examination practices, such as the use of unseen analysis of artworks for examination, essentially remaining unchanged since the 1990s (Morris, et al., 2017). Unseen image responses require students to analyse the formal qualities and meanings conveyed in unfamiliar artworks using strategies developed in their studies. This form of analysis remains embedded in the *Analysis* assessment type of the current ATAR Visual Arts Responding component, with the artworks

selected for examination typically reflective of Western-European and Indigenous Australian cultural and historical traditions. This suggests that the structure and content in the Responding component have not changed in a significant period despite changes in Australian society.

Despite little change to Responding practices, attempts to enhance student engagement with art in a globalized and increasingly digital society has resulted in the advent of *Visual Culture Art Education* (VCAE) dominating much of the discourse in visual art education research. As a paradigm, visual culture rejects traditional, Western art traditions and instead examines a broader variety of everyday objects and visual imagery (Duncum, 2002b; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009; Kuttner, 2015; Saribas, et al, 2021; D'Alleva & Cothren, 2021). This variety of 'cultural artifacts' studied in VCAE makes this approach multimodal, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural (Duncum, 2002a, 2010; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003; D'Alleva & Cothren, 2021), prompting analysis of the assumptions, values, and stereotypes imbued within everyday imagery (Duncum 2001; Kuttner, 2015; Chin, 2015). Given the changes in the composition of Australian society from largely homogenous to multi, and transcultural, the influence of VCAE in the selection of images for study could provide more inclusive imagery for students from a variety of contexts to decode. Despite obvious constraints around the scope of examination materials to represent all contexts, complementary use of VCAE imagery alongside the traditional fine arts selections could ease the strain on students and teachers attempting to build culturally specific knowledge required to analyse artworks from Western-European and Aboriginal cultural traditions commonly found in end of year examinations.

Regrettably, the potential of VCAE's influence is not as widely implemented as the breadth of its literature might suggest. Qualitative studies by Goble, (2013) and Gil-Glazer (2020) found little evidence of meaningful VCAE implementation in senior school art classrooms, noting that educators either did not understand how to implement it in the school contexts and or were reluctant to change their course delivery and examination preparation practices. Due to its breadth, there is little consensus amongst educators in defining and teaching visual culture (Duncum, 2009), whilst its boundlessness tends to clash with standardized, test-focused school contexts (Freedman, 2003), such as the high-stakes, university entrance ATAR course, thus minimizing its potential benefits for CALD learners.

Visual literacy and contextual interpretation

Visual literacy is defined as the ability to decode, encode, and use past experiences and contexts to inform the interpretation of meaning in an image (Flood, 2004; Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011). This encompasses the decoding of visual elements, such as colours and symbols that suggest meaning in an artwork. Visual literacy is considered fundamental not only to Arts Responding success, but is also considered a life skill (SCSA, 2014; SCSA 2017). Broadly speaking, visual literacy also offers recent immigrants the skills required to interpret visual phenomena and cultural representations in a new, home country to which they are acclimatizing.

Despite the value of visual literacy to decode visual elements, specific contextual knowledge laden in the artworks selected for the ATAR examinations remains fundamental to the critical interpretation of meaning in artworks. This presents a particular challenge for CALD learners as their contextual knowledge may not reflect the knowledge privileged in the analysis of artworks from Western societies. It is widely recognised that images are socially, culturally, and historically bound (Duncum 2001privileged, 2002a; Kuttner 2015, Keifer-Boyd, 2018), that image meaning changes depending on viewing context (Goble, 2013), and that contextual knowledge is essential to interpretation (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Newman & Ogle, 2019). Yet it is this often overlooked aspect of the Responding component that most disadvantages CALD learners. The relevance of contextual knowledge in analysing artwork is confirmed by Morris' (2015) findings that Year 11 ATAR Visual Arts students who also studied Modern History or English Literature felt an advantage over peers who did not take these courses when analysing unfamiliar artworks. These subjects contribute to contextual knowledge of Western culture and suggest that this type of knowledge is advantageous in examining the artworks selected in this course. Nevertheless, there is little literature on what visual arts specialists are doing to build this 'insider knowledge'.

Implications for CALD learners

Despite the range of arts interpretation challenges CALD learners face, there is little exigent literature investigating strategies for supporting skill development in these capabilities for this cohort of learners. Research addressing culturally responsive practice in visual art education is sparse and focuses on uplifting cultural voices through artmaking as opposed to teaching strategies for the analysis of cultural

imagery in new contexts. For example, Smilan's (2017) autoethnographic study of culturally inclusive practice was positioned within an Elementary (primary school) context. Whereas Knight (2015) examines the preparedness of pre-service art educators in meeting CALD learner needs in visual arts within the university setting. Both studies offer useful recommendations, such as undertaking professional development in cultural diversity awareness (Knight, 2015) and allowances for visual formats for responding to art (Smilan, 2017), however, these recommendations are not readily applicable. Specific professional development can be difficult to find, and visual format responses are not an appropriate strategy in high-stakes university entrance examinations. Beyond success in university entrance courses, competence in the critical interpretation of cultural imagery is a life skill, offering social capital (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2005), allowing participation in one's cultural community, a right upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Kuttner, 2015). This emphasizes the role of visual literacy and understanding of visual culture beyond university entrance, toward providing cultural citizenship for CALD learners.

Research Aims and Questions

The proposed research aims to investigate the experiences of expert secondary visual arts educators in supporting CALD students in the Arts Responding component of the ATAR Visual Arts course. The study will examine participant understanding of visual literacy and VCAE and investigate their perceived challenges and successes in teaching CALD learners how to interpret unfamiliar imagery. In meeting the research aims, the study will adopt qualitative, open-ended research questions that seek to obtain rich participant experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021):

1. What do experienced visual arts educators understand about the additional needs of CALD learners?
2. How do experienced visual arts educators navigate the acquisition of visual literacy, and what factors shape the types of artworks selected for study?
3. How do experienced secondary visual arts educators support CALD learners in the *Responding* component of the ATAR Visual Arts course?

Methodology and Methods

The phenomenon being investigated demands the recognition of multiple perspectives in the interpretation of imagery and educator practice, each bound within complex, research environments. Accordingly, this study falls within the post-Positivist paradigm (Cohen, et al., 2018). An Arts-Based Education Research (ABER) methodology will be used to examine the relationship between embodied experiences and context, resulting in subjective interpretations of a phenomenon uncovered through art practices that ultimately addresses an educational research problem (Rolling, 2019), as seen in Figure 1. The use of visual and discursive forms in this ABER design will assist in uncovering, understanding, and representing the research findings in an evocative and accessible form. As such, discursive interview data from a small sample of experienced art educators will provide in-depth data on participant perspectives of the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021), whilst ABER methods of visual inquiry and representation of data will assist in rendering unique insights from visually literate participants that may be otherwise constrained by discursive communication alone (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In combining discursive and visual data, deep understanding of a complex phenomenon may be achieved (Leavy, 2020).

Cyclical data collection

This study will be configured as a longitudinal dialogue with participants, exploring the narrative of their experiences against the research questions, as seen in Figure 2. This dialogue will occur over three sets of interviews with five participants, wherein a series of jointly produced artworks reflecting interview findings will function as the analysis, and synthesis of the research results. As such, a cyclical process of data collection encompassing interviews and studio sites of data collection and creation will need to be enacted.

Semi-structured interviews will form the first data collection method in a cycle of three interviews with five participants. Each, one-hour interview will be video recorded using WebEx software and transcribed verbatim. This data will then be thematically coded using software such as NVivo. These semi-structured interviews will provide scope for unexpected, descriptive, and nuanced responses from participants whilst maintaining the research focus, aligned to the research questions (Cohen, et al., 2018).

Each interview will unpack the experiences of participants through a narrative of realisation of the problem, their struggles, and potential solutions, thus encouraging the development of metaphorical responses and visualisations (e.g. response drawings) that provide visual data to be thematically coded. As seen in Figure 3, the combination of participant and researcher produced visualisations of interview data and participant-made creative artifacts will develop the visual iconography (recognisable symbols) used in the final synthesis artworks created by the researcher to represent each participant's 'voice' following each interview.

Three sites of visual data collection will be sourced in the creation and analysis of visual iconography to be used in the final synthesis artworks, providing a broader palette with which to understand and communicate the findings (Fish, 2019; Leavy, 2020). Visual forms also transform interview data into expressive forms that allow viewers to engage empathically with experiences and perspectives unfamiliar to them (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Fish, 2019; Leavy, 2020). The culmination of this data collection process will result in a body of fifteen illustrative synthesis paintings accompanied by didactic panels (explanatory wall posters) that will perform the research findings in an accessible and engaging form.

Selecting the sample

A purposive, homogenous sample of five experienced ATAR visual arts teachers will be used to investigate effective strategies used in supporting CALD students in Arts Responding. This careful selection of participants will assist in fulfilling the needs of the study, as is common in much qualitative research (Cohen, et al., 2018). Whilst such samples may reduce the transferability of the results to a broader population, it is useful in producing a depth of information relevant to educators in similar contexts (Cohen, et al., 2018). Participants will be selected based on the following criteria:

- i. *Arts Specialists* – Currently or have taught the Year 11 or 12 ATAR Visual Arts course in the past three years.
- ii. *Experience* – Level 3 (Department of Education), or Head of Arts, or at least ten years of experience delivering the ATAR Visual Arts course.
- iii. *Context* - Teach in a school with a moderate to high CALD student population.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of this non-traditional research output, frequent participant checks will underpin the data collection and synthesis processes (Chilton & Leavy, 2020; Leavy, 2020), with significant input of visual data originating from the participants themselves, as seen in Figures 2 and 3. Additionally, the insights of experienced, visually literate educators will ensure that the same visual language is understood and communicated between researcher and participant. Finally, Chilton and Leavy's (2020) criteria for evaluating ABR will be revisited across the breadth of the study to ensure the study maintains:

- i. Fit between research aims and methodology
- ii. Aesthetic power to invoke viewer understanding
- iii. Usefulness of the work in enacting social change or contributing to knowledge
- iv. Power of the participants' voice communicated in the artwork
- v. Authenticity of the participant voice represented artfully
- vi. Canonical generativity in the transferability of understanding

Significance Statement

As the review of the literature demonstrates, no study in the Australian or international setting has investigated the challenges faced by CALD learners when tasked with interpreting culturally situated imagery unrelated to their own context. Consequently, this study will be the first to address the struggles faced by CALD learners in Australian ATAR Visual Arts courses by investigating the strategies used by experienced art educators to support the acquisition of visual literacy for decoding unfamiliar, culturally situated artworks. The strategies revealed in the proposed research will benefit Australian senior school visual arts educators in CALD schools as well as visual arts educators here and abroad delivering art interpretation as part of a visual arts course. These strategies may also have broader applications across subject areas within Australian and international settings. For example, these strategies may be relevant to the interpretation of advertisements in English, and historical sources in the Humanities. Pre-service and early career educators in these subjects here and abroad may also find value in the strategies revealed in this study.

Finally, the proposed study is methodologically significant in adopting a mixed-methods ABER design, combining traditional and contemporary qualitative research methods. ABER is well-established internationally and in the Eastern states of Australia, however it is uncommon in the Western Australian education research setting (Paris, et al., 2022). This study will contribute to the promotion of methodological innovation in Western Australian arts education research and supports the growing repertoire of research design within ABER.

Ethics Statement

Upon acceptance of the Milestone 1 submission, Ethics Approval will be applied for. The codes and guidelines stipulated in the NHMRC Statement on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans as well as the Curtin guidelines for conducting Research Involving Humans will be adhered to across the breadth of the study. Therefore, all participants will be required to complete informed consent forms, acknowledging that they are aware of the objectives, procedures and potential risks and benefits of the research (Cohen, et al., 2018). For example, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants will need to be carefully maintained where their ‘likeness’ may be captured in the synthesis paintings representing their experiences. In mitigating this, participants will be made aware of this potential risk and metaphorical, as opposed to realistic iconography will be used in the final synthesis artworks. An additional ABER related ethics concern exists in the copyright and attribution of participant created visual artworks. In addressing this, informed consent regarding the use of their work for research purposes, and options to have visual artworks for exhibition attributed to participants willing to forgo anonymity, will be required. In maintaining Covid-19 provisions, video interview calls and the sharing of participant creative works will be conducted via private, online platforms. Participant checking of synthesis paintings will similarly occur on these platforms, which will be closed, invite-only groups. To further maintain confidentiality within this online group, participants will not be required to use their full/actual names if they choose to maintain their anonymity.

Data Management Statement

Both physical and digital data will be collected in this study, each to be in alignment with the Curtin University Research Data Management guidelines (Curtin University, 2021). Physical data (sketches and drawings) will be stored in locked cabinets prior to being scanned and works in progress of the synthesis paintings will be stored in the researcher’s locked studio space, each of which will only be accessible by the researcher and supervisors. Digital data, such as interview footage, will initially be stored on a password protected laptop, within password protected files. These data will then be secured on an approved Curtin R Drive. Again, all digital data will only be accessible, through password protection, by the researcher and supervisors. Finally, data will be retained for 7 years, as stipulated in the Curtin Research Guidelines.

Budget and Timeline

In producing a non-traditional research output, this study will require allocation of the budget (see Appendix 1) towards transcription software subscriptions for use in collecting qualitative data, as well as art supplies for use in the response artworks and final synthesis paintings, both stipulated as accepted consumables under the Curtin Essential Facilities for Research Students (2021). The potential costs for exhibition will be kept to a minimum as exhibition of work will be organised at the university’s School of Art and Design, as well as potentially within the Education building. As such, the initial \$1,225 made available for this study will be more than enough with an additional \$1,225 made available for the body of work following Milestone 2 approval.

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
2022												
Thesis start – 03/03/2022												
Literature review and proposal writing												
Milestone 1 – Candidacy due 03/09/2022												
Application for ethics approval												
Participant recruitment												
Preparation of interview schedule												
Pilot testing and question refinement												
Pilot testing ABR visualisation strategies												
2023												
Interview cycle 1												
Data collection and thematic coding												
Response artworks												
Synthesis Artwork and Didactic Panel 1												
Process refinement/methodology review												
Interview cycle 2												
Data collection and thematic coding												
2024												
Response artworks												
Milestone 2 – Mid-Candidacy 02/03/2024												
Synthesis Artwork and Didactic Panel 2												
Interview cycle 3												
Data collection and thematic coding												
Response artworks												
Synthesis Artwork and Didactic Panel 3												
2025												
Writing the Exegesis												
Finalisation of synthesis artworks												
Exhibition preparations												
Refinement of Creative Practice Thesis (artworks and exegesis)												
Milestone 3 – Pre-submission due 02/11/2025												

List of Figures

Figure 1. Methodology aligned to the research problem

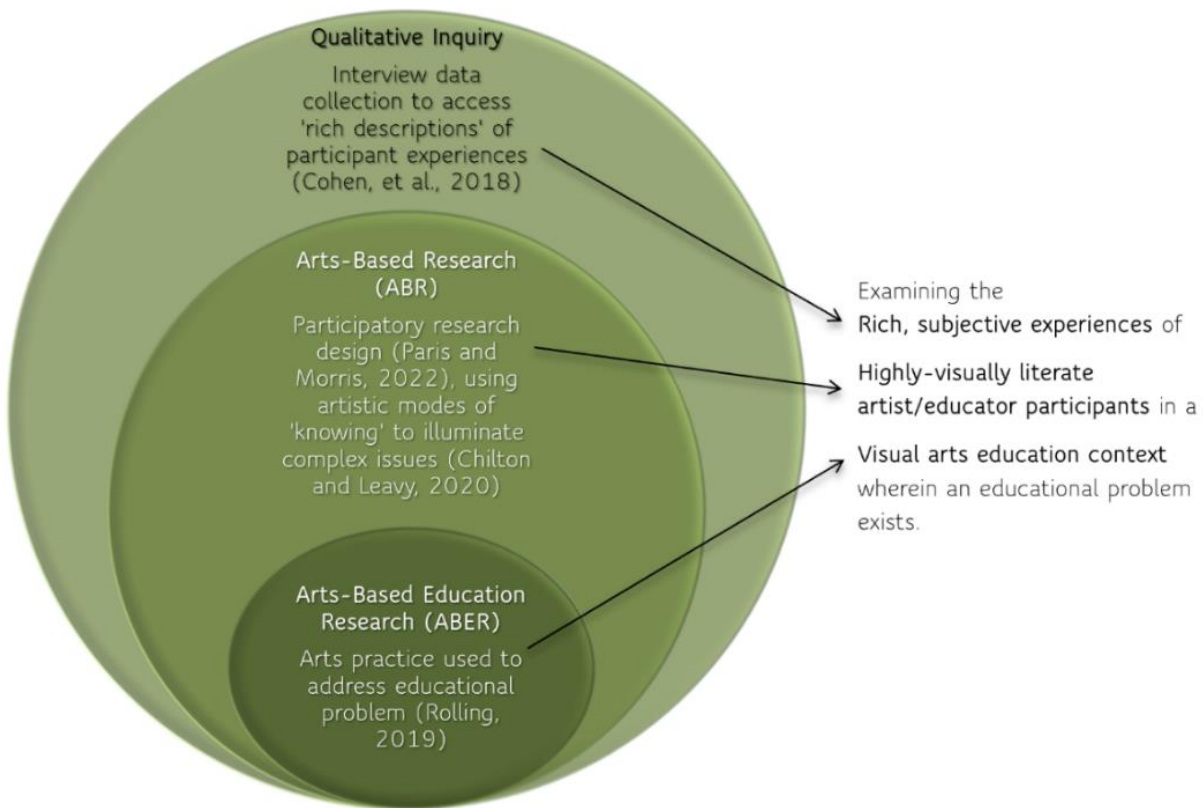


Figure 2. Cyclical data collection process for each participant

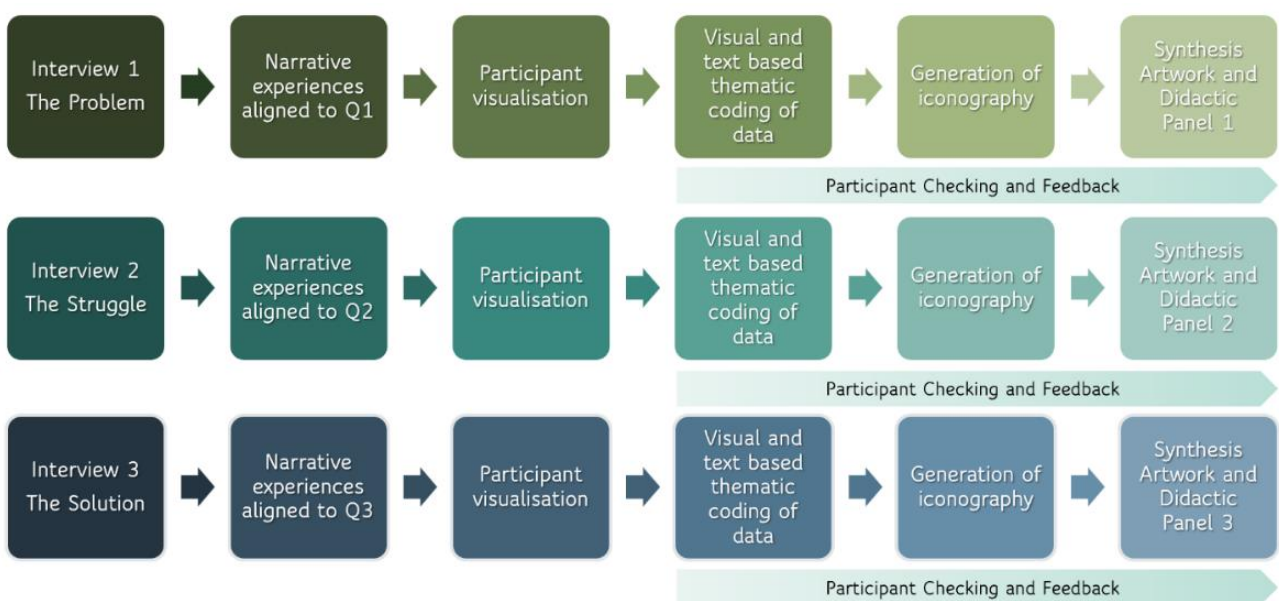
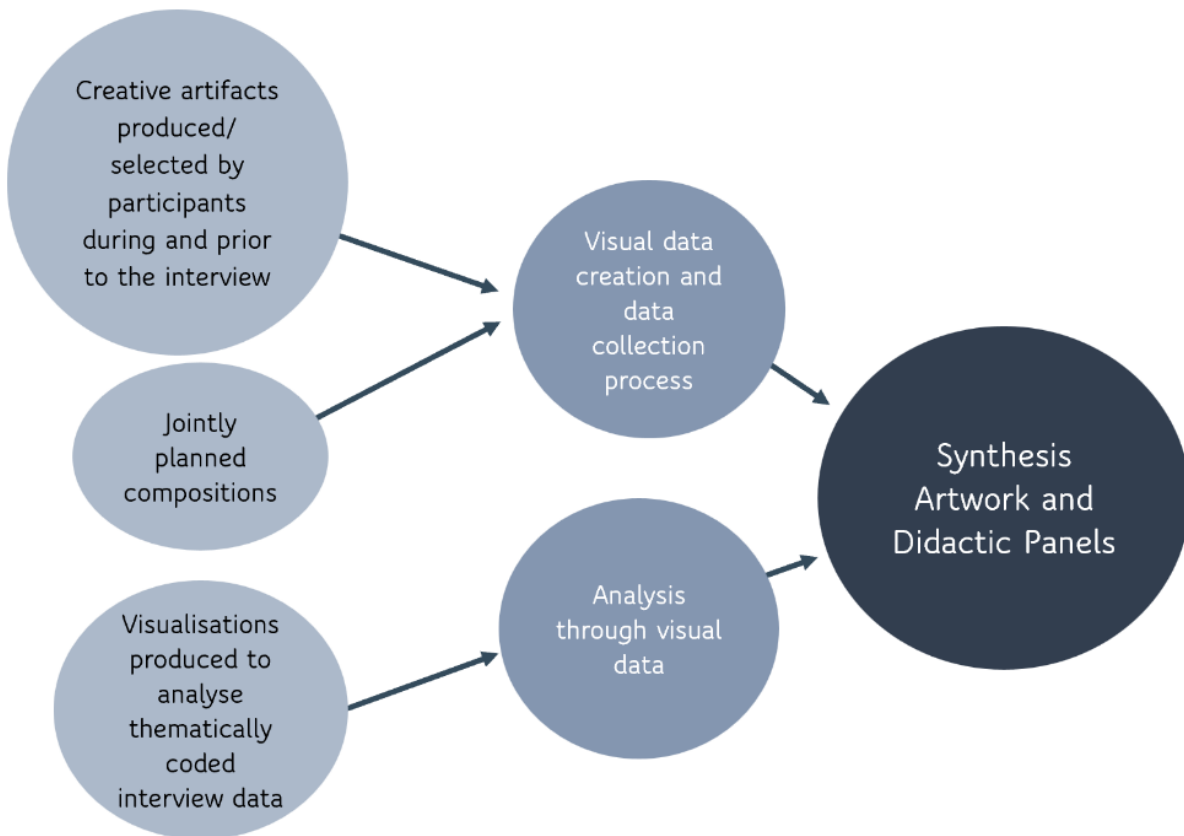


Figure 3. Use of visual data to produce synthesis artworks



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Appendix

Appendix 1. Proposed budget

<u>Items</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Arts supplies (canvas, oil paints, turpentines)	\$1,000
Transcription software (Otter.A.I subscription)	\$50
Conference attendance fees	\$500
Exhibition opening and installation of works	\$450
Total	\$2,000

Appendix 2. ABR Visualisation example

Just trying to keep my head above water

Feel weighed down – so much stuff to do

Feels like a black hole I might fall into

I'm not participating – I'm just watching



ABR Visualisation process from
initial interview response data
(Paris, et al., 2022).