



PERCEPTIONS



Conveying Migration
Experiences Through
Storytelling and Illustration



Location

Swansea City of Sanctuary's 'Home Away from Home' Exhibition, Grand Multicultural Hub, Swansea (21st March – 7th April 2022)



Contributors

Swansea University, Sweeta Durrani, Carys Walsh



Audience

This activity involved over 250 children aged 8-11 from 4 schools in Swansea, Hafod Primary School, Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr, Parkland Primary School and St Joseph's Cathedral Primary School. The outputs of the activity are shared online with the general public and will also be available to other users, including first-line practitioners, CSOs and migrant organisations.



Purpose/Aim

This workshop allows children to empathise and view migration through the perspective of a real-life story, as opposed to the often reductive, homogenous and problematic perspectives provided by some mainstream media. With the migration story being translated into physical form by an illustrator, it took a new shape beyond language. The illustrator used artistic devices to express specific emotions and themes, such as continuous line drawings, which represented a particular temporality of the migration journey. The knowledge and empathy that participants gained from the workshop are shared with the public using social media, accompanied by quotes from the artist and storyteller. This approach can be used as a template by practitioners to innovatively interact with migration themes that appeared in the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews.



Description of the Activity

The activity is centred around the migration story of Afghan activist and filmmaker, Sweeta Durrani. Sweeta told her story to the participants verbally and through the use of a presentation and video, making particular emphasis on the themes in her story that coincide with those found in the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews (hope, loss, uncertainty etc.). Sweeta also asked the audience questions (See figure 2) related to the specific themes. Meanwhile, Sweeta's story was transformed into a physical form by illustrator, Carys Walsh, who used artistic methods to portray similar themes from the PERCEPTIONS interviews.



Figure 1: Sweeta leaves her past self (Floral Window backdrop)

Sweeta's Questions

Q1 - what 3 things have you learned about Afghanistan?

Q2 - What does Home mean to you? How might you feel in a strange country without a place to call Home? (Theme - invisible , disoriented)

Q3 - Have you ever felt lost in a place you do not know? Did anyone help you?
(Theme - disorientation and possibly hope and community depending on the answer)

Figure 2: Sweeta's Questions



Techniques

The activity progressed in 4 stages

Stage 1: Storytelling

Sweetea introduced the viewers (children) to her migration story, paying particular attention to themes from the PERCEPTIONS project migrant interviews that were present. She reflected upon her past life in Afghanistan where she was a filmmaker, businesswoman and activist, the reasons why she had to flee her home country, her journey to Wales and other trials and tribulations. She particularly focused on the challenging experience of having to leave her children and family behind when she fled and the hope that she will be reunited with them someday. This experience resonated with many viewers, children and adults alike, providing a level of empathy for migration experiences that would not have normally been experienced by the public in their regular lives or through popular media.

Stage 2: Short Film

Sweetea shared a short (10-minute) film with the viewers that showed more of her past life in Afghanistan, such as her relationship with her children and deep connection with her brother and father. Her late father encouraged Sweetea to become the feminist activist and businesswoman she eventually turned out to be.

Stage 3: Questions

After the video, Sweetea handed out question sheets to the viewers (children) and asked them to answer very basic questions about Afghanistan. The questions included: what do people eat, how large is Afghanistan, is it larger than Wales and what kind of languages do they speak; creating a connection between the viewers and the story and improving their knowledge of her home country.

Concurrent stage: Illustration

Whilst Sweetea shared her migration story with participants, illustrator, Carys Walsh, simultaneously translated it into several artistic drawings. These drawings represent several themes that appeared in the PERCEPTIONS project migrant interviews, including hope, loss and uncertainty. Carys focused mainly on an art nouveau style, as it brought the characters a "melancholic look [that is] quite emotional, and almost like statues", and also experimented with continuous line drawings to represent an ongoing journey.

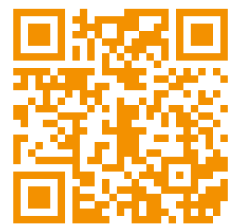


Figure 3:
Scan QR Code to view
Sweetea's short film



Key Concepts

Storytelling

Learning from the research-based theatre piece, *The Last Country*, which utilised 30 oral histories of migrant women gathered by a migration research project, the Story and Illustration workshop brought migration oral-history outside of the University setting and presented it in a public space. In empowering a migrant to freely express their own story, the workshop refused to mimic and present migrants as easily fitting into the hegemonic migration narratives circulated in policy and popular culture, highlighting their individuality (Erwin, 2021). Sweeta shared a short film (Figure 3) with the children which showed her life and role as a businesswoman, activist and teacher in Afghanistan before she had to flee to Wales. The film expressed in more than linguistic terms the experiences of separation, loss and re-discovery of oneself, which the viewers would not have experienced without the workshop. In this specific instance of the workshop, many viewers were incredibly empathetic and deeply connected with Sweeta's experience of having to leave her children and family whilst fleeing Afghanistan. Several teachers and children expressed how the story resonated with them after the workshop, showing the power of stories to change perceptions of migration.

Illustration

Illustration, through its etymology, stems from the Latin word: *lux, lucis*, denoting "light". It suggests that illustration gives an artist the power to enlighten, offering a focused glow to stories that have long been in the dark. Thus, illustration uses visual imagery that both captivates viewers and evokes an emotional response (Spitz, 2015). As such, illustration is an act of empowerment. By immortalising the oral history of migration into a physical, artistic form, it highlights the themes that migrants consider important in the stories they tell. Illustrating these stories encourages viewers to infer and empathise with those stories without explicit explanation through language (s). The action of sketching is a way of remembering that unfolds as trace-makers are added to a paper. In this case, the drawings provide a form of reflection that does not focus on a finished object but rather express a process of describing an emerging and unfolding journey (Gunn, 2006: 117). The illustrator, Carys Walsh, did sketching using the method of continuous line (Figure 4) without removing the pencil from the paper. In this case, continuous line is used as a representation of Sweeta's migration journey, implying that migration does not end once a migrant enters their host country. Instead, continuous line points to a journey's perpetual and uncertain nature with many twists and turns, for better or for worse. Drawing inspiration from Jules Desbois and Alexandre Charpentier, Carys' use of drawings in the Art Nouveau style help to capture the asymmetry of migration journeys (Lahor & Brimacombe, 2012). Carys depicts this asymmetry in migration in Figure 1, showing the differences between the flora, architecture and dress of Sweeta's home country, Afghanistan, and host country, Wales. "It's almost like there's two different versions of herself" said Carys, "her Afghanistan self and her Welsh self. They both have different qualities and strengths." This approach shows the migration process through Sweeta's past-self's positioning between the past (left) and present (right) sides of the illustration.



Figure 4: An illustration of Sweeta's migration journey using continuous line.



Outcomes

Outcomes of this activity include a collection of drawings created by illustrator Carys Walsh during the workshop. They have been shared online with the general public to disseminate for a wider audience to empathise and infer Sweetea's story through Carys' art (See Figure 5). Through the PERCEPTIONS workshop feedback forms, it was found that the workshop contributed to 77% of participants believing they had a better understanding of migrant experiences and 86% believed they had a better understanding of how Wales/Europe are seen by migrants.



Figure 5: scan the QR code to see the Social Media post (Instagram)



Impact

By listening to and watching Sweetea's migration story, the participants (children) gained knowledge about migration and engaged with different expressions of cross-border movements. One participant, when asked if they'd like to say anything about the day's activities, specifically highlighted their enjoyment of "the documentary because I learned about a country", reflecting on Sweetea's story. This was further proved by 93% of participating children expressing their enjoyment of the workshop activities, with several directly expressing their interest and satisfaction in hearing Sweetea's story: "I liked watching a video about the girl".

Sweetea's story and the short film also ensured a positive and inclusive experience for the children by allowing them to relate to a first-hand migration account from a female speaker, emphasising the importance of gender in migration. Participants had an opportunity to understand someone who they may consider to be different to them. When asked about their favourite part of the day, one child said "I liked seeing the Afghanistan woman. I understood what the woman said, it was really nice but sad hearing her story." This quote demonstrates the empathy and knowledge gained by the children on a topic they would not yet have engaged with in their school curriculum. Despite this, about 70% of participants believed that the ideas they gained from the workshop would assist them in improving their school results.

By translating Sweetea's migration story into the illustration of Carys Walsh, the workshop engaged viewers with migration themes and encouraged them to empathise and interpret the illustration without the use of language(s). The art, which is now freely available via social media and will also be viewable through the PERCEPTIONS online platform and Swansea University's PERCEPTIONS webpage will allow the general public to engage with migration



Figure 6: Sweeta leaves her past self (mountainous background)



Figure 7: Sweeta past and present

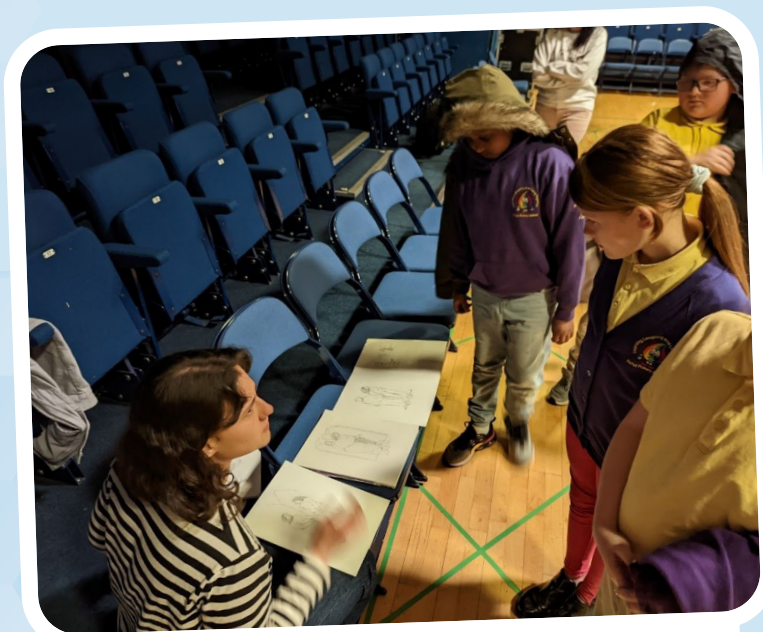


Figure 8: Children from Hafod Primary School, Swansea, comment on Carys' illustrations of Sweeta's story



References:

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This project has received funding from the European Union's H2020 Research & Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 833870.

