THE USES OF VISUAL CULTURE IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

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Images have become ubiquitous. Therefore, teaching visual culture needs to be integrated to English language teaching (ELT). As a result, opportunities for its study and experience seem to be emerging in English language teacher education (ELTE) programmes in Argentina. Here, an attempt in that vein is reported through the description and assessment of a series of activities carried out by the teacher educator in charge of the course on contemporary literature at the ELTE programme at the National University of La Pampa (UNLPam). The results are aimed at encouraging a further sharing of teaching experiences and more systematic research in the field.

Conceptual Framework

In its attempts at reliving art as experience, this work must be inscribed in the Deweyan (1994) tradition. John Dewey (1994), the American philosopher and educator, urged teachers "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are the works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience" (205). Nowadays, it must be acknowledged, though, that it is not precisely literature that constitutes the central artistic experience in most people's lives. Visual culture has taken that role, and human cultural experience, once tightly tied to the written word, has become visual (Mirzoeff 2015). Film and TV series turn out to be the most popular ways of consuming narratives, and, through social networking, photography is by far the most popular way of storytelling. Also inspired by Dewey (1994), Argentina Arts teacher educator Gabriela Augustowsky (2012) hailed art as "a powerful didactic device capable of configuring even a resistant space against the flood of advertising images" (32). Even though both Dewey (1994) and Augustowsky (2012) highlighted the need for visual culture to be necessarily related to experience, both implicitly emphasize the key role of teaching in tying everyday reality to a valuable visual culture and an artistic expression.

In her early work, Augustowsky (2005) claimed that classroom walls constituted the central aesthetic space at schools but warned against the excessive power exerted by teachers in the decisions taken about the visual production displayed on them, a warning also issued by Pratt (2017) for artists' school projects in ELT. Augustowsky's (2012, 2016, 2017) more recent work established strong grounds for the development of art in teaching children. There is a powerful call to teach how to experience visual culture or, perhaps even better, how to use different "reading" strategies in order to develop abilities that go beyond mere comprehension into forms of reflective interpretation (Augustowsky 2012). This entails furthering the knowledge and the aesthetic enjoyment of visual culture and, in due course, offering the students chances of active production and collaborative creation. Classroom experiences in that vein are thoroughly described in Augustowsky's (2012, 2017) last two volumes, and they became her pedagogy of creation, one that activates both the students' rational capacities and their emotional perceptions as well. Last, Augustowsky (2017) asserts that "not only children must be offered audiovisual education but it is the teachers' own artistic production and experimentation that should be promoted in the hope that they result in rich and creative teaching practices" (164).

The publication of *The Image in English Language Teaching* (Donaghy & Xerri 2017) decidedly set the basis for an integration of visual culture to ELT. In that volume, Zakime (2017), for instance, proposed the development of visual literacy, Clare (2017) advocated for the use of film, and Wasilewska (2017) potently reflected on teaching English to a visual generation. The power of using images lies, in sum, in their ability to trigger stories in the minds of the students and create a need and a desire to communicate – the ultimate goal of ELT. Similarly, in the local context, our research team has already reported on experiences carried out in the context of ELTE. Through the collaborative creation of photo-stories, Basabe (2018b) demonstrated that working with narrative and photography provided prospective teachers with a framework to interpret human experience, an issue that is always at the core of the teaching enterprise. Finally, drawing on Baker (2015),

Basabe, Tamagni, and Schiel (2016) suggested exploring national cultures through reproductions of art and representing globalization through selfies as a way of acknowledging the key role of visual culture in the teaching and learning process today.

In ELTE, the power of using images in the literature class should take students beyond the basic requirements of the communicative approaches to ELT. Reading images (Augustowsky 2012) may foster analytical skills not only to accompany but also to reinforce those strategies as applied to the reading of written texts. Similarly, working with images as a way of encouraging planned talk and personal narrative may take advanced English language learners to the critical and constructive engagement with the ideas of their classmates. Those were precisely the practices favoured by the participants in this research. There was a commitment in both the teacher educator and the class to put into practice what might be called *literate English*. For Wallace (2002), literate English is "more elaborated than informal speech, makes explicit its grounds, and provides a useful bridge into expository written language" (106). This is clearly aligned with both the overall tenets of ELTE and the more personal, sometimes critical, approach to the teaching of literature being implemented in the literature course under analysis and whose results have been reported elsewhere (Basabe 2016, 2018a).

In view of this conceptual framework and due to the close relationship between literature and the visual arts, the teacher educator in charge of the course on contemporary literature at the ELTE programme at UNLPam has recently taken by himself the decision to integrate visual culture to the teaching of literature. Here, the design of a series of activities developed in that direction is described, and their implementation is assessed and discussed, preceded by a brief description of the methodology used for this research. These were guided by the following questions:

a) How was visual culture used in the literature class in ELTE?

b) To what extent could those uses benefit ELTE?

Method
Setting
The activities under analysis were put into practice in 2017 and 2018 in *English Literature II* in the ELTE programme at UNLPam, a medium-sized state university in La Pampa, Argentina. The ELT programme at UNLPam is the only one in the

context of ELTE in the province. It takes four years to complete, and it was followed as of 2018 by about 350 students. *English Literature II* is a subject taught in English during the second term of the fourth year of the course of studies. About 15 students take the course every year, and it is taught over 17 weeks in the spring term (August to November) in 2 weekly periods of 2 hours each.

The contents of *English Literature II* officially comprise three key styles of culture in the 20th century: modernism, post-modernism, and post-colonialism (UNLPam 2013). However, though these contents are still covered, the course had been methodologically transformed into a reading seminar in which the students explore themes; they choose a class in open spaces of debate and inquiry in the critical and collaborative terms suggested in the conceptual framework. In that context, random attempts were also made to integrate visual culture into the teaching of literature.

Participants
A specialist in education, the teacher educator was male and 45 years old. He had taught the course since 1999. In 2017 and 2018, the time when the activities were put into practice, the course was taken by 6 and 11, students, respectively. Two of them were male and the rest were female, all of them aged between 22 and 25. The students were all non-literature specialist but advanced English language learners.

Procedure
The research was an instance of qualitative enquiry (Cresswell 1998; Patton 2001) exclusively based on document analysis since, as it was conducted after the activities were put into practice, there was no possibility of doing observations. This may constitute one of the limitations of this work. However, the students' responses to the activities suggested were partially recovered from the visual records kept in the teacher educator belongings in the years under examination.

Data collection
The documents collected for the study comprised (a) notes on the aims, design, and practice of the activities recorded in the teacher educator's teaching diaries, (b) the visual records of the activities, and (c) brief evaluative narratives of the activities written by four students, two of them belonging to the class of 2017 and two belonging to 2018. Even though the sample was small, it was considered rather representative in view of the also small student population taking the course in

those academic years. The students recalled their experiences on the basis of three open questions that they were asked to apply to each of the activities: (a) What was the aim of the activity? (b) How did you like it? Why? (3) How useful did you find it? Why?

Data Analysis

The teacher educator's notes were analysed in order to assess his explicit aims in the uses of visual culture in the literature class, to determine the steps suggested for practice, and to evidence his evaluation of the activities. The students' responses to them were surveyed through the brief narratives described above. Both sets of documents were examined following standard techniques of document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Gibbs 2007). When it was considered pertinent, the students' work was also described. Those descriptions were inspired by the ethnographic work carried out by Ball (1998) and Soto (2014), due to the prominence given by both to the visual availability of culture as a token for everyday aesthetic human action. The records including images of the students were used with their informed consent. Because of the different sources used for the study, triangulation was achieved at the level of data. However, following Denzin (1978), analyst and theory triangulation were also attempted.

Activities in Practice
Design and Implementation

The activities designed and implemented in 2017 and 2018 were (1) watching film clips, (2) designing timelines and sociograms, (3) drawing book covers, and (4) narrating through photographs. Below, the aims of the activities are stated, and brief descriptions of them are offered.

Activity #1: Watching film clips (in pairs or small groups). Through watching film clips based on literary texts students can be (1) asked to recognize the conflict of a play or narrative, (2) expected to enjoy the performance of drama in more realistic terms than through reading a script, and (3) encouraged to recognize dramatic structure and devices such as hamartia or tragic heroism, which are usually better appreciated by literature students in film than in the written version of a play.

During the years under consideration, the trailer for a performance of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (McDonagh 1996) and film clips from *Fences* (Washington 2016) were used. The teacher educator instructed the students to work in pairs or small groups and provided them with a succinct

context for what they would watch and with specific guidelines on what they were likely to detect in the clip. The above-mentioned trailer, for example, was used to have the students make predictions on the events in the play; whereas the film clips were used to analyse conflict. Once they watched the clips suggested, the students have small group discussions, and they shared their views with the rest of the class under the teacher educator's supervision.

Activity #2: Designing timelines and sociograms (in small groups). Timelines and sociograms aim primarily at demonstrating the intensive reading of a literary text. Timelines specifically showed the students' knowledge of the events in a narrative and their significance for the development of a story. Sociograms confirmed the students' ability to grasp characterization and the key conflicts among the different personalities at play in a literary text.

The students drew timelines for *The Story of the Night* (Tóibín 1996) based on quotations from the novel selected by the teacher educator, and they produced a sociogram for *The crucible* (Miller 2016) with name tags for the characters in the play and labelling on their own the feelings that inspire the social and power relationships among them. In both cases, construction paper, markers, and magazines were used for the production of posters that were later presented to the class. During the presentations, the students were also encouraged to chart their changing responses and empathies over the course of the reading.

In the case of the novel, the students were also required to state whether the decisions taken by the characters were their personal choice or wholly or partly imposed by society. In the case of the play, they were instructed to illustrate their posters with images of people from magazines that resembled the characters the way they imagined they could be in contemporary society. The final presentations usually revealed the differences in reading and interpretation among the groups, in which case the students were requested to provide textual evidence for their claims. A timeline drawn by students in the class of 2018 and a sociogram produced by students in the class of 2017 are displayed in Appendix 1 (Figs. 1 and 2).

Activity #3: Drawing book covers (in small groups). The students were asked to concentrate on the key theme in a novel and on its translation to graphic representation. After thoughtful discussion and design, their goal was to produce a book cover clearly illustrating the theme in

Steinbeck's (1965) *Of Mice and Men* in 2017, or Rhys' (1998) *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 2018. The covers would also be visually enticing for potential readers of the novels. The students were provided with markers and construction paper and requested to think of themselves as artists or designers. They were reminded that in visual culture they could also make use of metaphors, metonymy, and other devices that are generally thought of as only literary.

As suggested by the figures in Appendix 2, a simple contrast between the students' productions in 2017 and 2018 show the extent to which the activity may become fruitful. The former (Fig. 3) demonstrate a strong focus on the merely narrative aspects of *Of Mice and Men*, as attested by the drawings showing in all cases the key events in the story, the killing of a dog and of one of its main characters in the hands of the other. The latter (Fig. 4) point at a far more figurative reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and at a more conscientious translation of key symbolic elements in the novel, such as fires or mirrors, to the graphic representation of its theme, the significance of which was later expanded upon through an account of the design processes of the covers made by each small group. The difference in quality between the productions might be due to the time in the term when they were required. Whereas the former took place at the beginning of the term, the latter was the result of the students' reading of the last novel in the syllabus, when previous work with visual culture and thorough discussions on literary techniques had already occurred.

Activity #4: Narrating through photographs (in pairs). As in the case of Activity #3, turning short stories into photo-stories also constitutes translating written narrative into visual representation. For the students, it may also imply exploring the relatively fixed principles of visual design or the more creative uses of photography.

Once a series of stories have been read and discussed, the students were grouped in pairs and assigned one story per pair. They were briefly lectured on the key tenets of graphic organization, and they were advised to pay careful attention to the precise details in the narrative they might want to focus on when transposing the story to the visual code. General guidelines were provided, but the students were given relative freedom to change settings, modes, and techniques, if desired, or to add music, or any other type of sound or visual effect to their stories.

As shown in Appendix 3, there was remarkable variety and evident creativity in the photo-stories presented by the students in 2017 and 2018. A pair of students turned Desai's (1978) "Surface Textures" into an accurately designed visual version of the literary text (Fig. 5), while another pair transferred Sorrentino' s (n.d.) "The Spirit of Emulation" into a set of photographs showing the rivalry between two neighbours whose feelings they made evident through emoji and written sound effects (Fig. 6). Both stories were ingeniously relocated in the students' context, present-day Santa Rosa, La Pampa. In that direction also went the video clip made by a third pair of students, who chose to represent Joyce's (2008) "Eveline" as a brief home-made film with sudden but striking lines of dialogue (Fig 7). Another pair in the class of 2018 went a step further and produced a series of Instagram stories based on Hemingway's (1987) "Cat in the Rain" which, despite its apparently intended comic effects, aptly made explicit its treatment of women's loneliness in a patriarchal context (Fig. 8).

Assessment and Discussion

In this section, we assess the activities described above in terms of four aspects we considered most salient in view of the processes of their design and implementation: (1) the integration of visual culture to the teaching of literature, (2) the progression and response to the activities during the course, (3) the degrees of guidance, and (4) their relationship with teacher education. For each of these aspects we reflect on the activities in perspective, and we offer the shared conclusions at which we arrived as students and teacher educator.

Evidently, in an effort to update his materials, the teacher educator did make an attempt to integrate visual culture to the teaching of literature during the years under analysis. This was intended to make literature closer to the students' everyday experience of narrative, nowadays mostly conveyed through films, TV series, and social networking. He was doubtful, however, about whether he was offering the students an opportunity to integrate art into their experience or he was creating still further distance between one and the other. In all cases, they had the chance to study and experience visual culture, but every time they did so, their observations and productions were mediated by the previous reading of literary texts and in no case did the visual constitute a first-hand experience. The texts

were in turn also chosen by the teacher educator, which may distance students further from experience, understood in the Deweyan (1994) sense of the term. Nevertheless, as the course was devoted, in fact, to the teaching of literature, it was not only reasonable but also desirable that the students as readers have the chance to create their own interpretations first, rather than having that of the director or the artist somehow imposed on them through their own particular readings of the literary works.

Actually concerned with the study of literature itself, the students evaluated the integration of visual culture to the teaching of literature in positive terms because they considered the activities proposed to be "useful for the class" (St. Resp. 1). In other words, they appreciated the fact the activities checked reading comprehension, favoured group discussion, and helped them establish clear relationships among literary texts and between them and life. Surprisingly, and along these lines, they especially valued Activity #1: Watching film clips, since they considered film clips "offered a different materialization of the text" (St. Resp. 1) and they "showed the interactions between the characters vividly" (St. Resp. 3). Last, they mentioned its advantages for present-day learners that seem to be distant from written texts. They reported film clips as "engaging more senses, which is particularly useful to students who have a developed visual competence" (St. Resp. 4). This is true when the filmed version of a play is offered to students, yet a likely contrast between narrative and film should be triggered from students when the original text out of which a film is produced is a novel or a short story. The students were decidedly valuing the activities positively in view of the reading strategies they were acquiring while actively recognizing at the same time the differences in aesthetic experience between literature and visual culture.

Now, as regards the progression and response to the activities during the course, the teacher educator was troubled by the fact that the activities were not presented systematically but through random attempts and partially creative moves. One of the students, for example, reported to be truly enthusiastic about Activity #3: Drawing book covers, and he described the experience this way:

> We were expressing ourselves and exploring our creativity applied to the text. I loved doing it because it felt like something we hadn't done before. We had to decide with my classmates what to include and how to do it. And we are able to display our creative/drawing/painting skills.

Yet, others pointed at the drawbacks of the inclusion of activities integrating visual culture to the teaching of literature in ELTE. Activity #2: Designing timelines and sociograms and Activity #3: Drawing book covers "may take too long" (St. Resp. 2), and Activity #4: Narrating through photographs "takes a lot of work" (St. Resp. 1). Apart from these problems, the difference in quality between the same activities proposed to students at different times throughout the term calls for a more ordered, systematic, and clearly focused integration of the visual to the teaching of literature.

Despite his description of the activities as "fun, enriching, and engaging" (St. Resp. 2), a student characterized the teacher educator's role in the activities as "dominant throughout" (St. Resp. 2). The degrees of structure and guidance in each case was different, though. In that vein, it could be claimed that, while Activity #1: Watching film clips and Activity #2: Designing timelines and sociograms were far more instructional and teacher-centred, Activity #3: Drawing book covers and Activity #4: Narrating through photographs fostered freedom and creativity, offering the students chances of active production and collaborative creation. Throughout the course, however, and as can be observed in Fig. 10 in Appendix 4, the teacher educator retained a central role, as either lecturer, supervisor, or decision-maker, for example, when he organized the arrangement of the posters on the classroom walls, an action against which Augustowsky (2005) already issued her word of caution.

As already suggested elsewhere (Basabe, Tamagni, & Schiel 2016), activities integrating visual culture to the teaching of literature should go from guided participation to open creativity. Perhaps due to its rigidly structured nature, for instance, a student claimed she was "not used to visual organizers" (St. Resp. 3) but acknowledged that "working with them in class triggers interesting discussions and a fruitful exchange of ideas and opinions" (St. Resp. 3). This definitely supports the development of literate English (Wallace 2002) in that, as well as developing literary appreciation and response, the activities become in turn highly valued resources for planned talk and language practice. Moreover, another student added that Activity #3: Drawing book covers "involves creativity and it is not a passive activity in the sense that you are actually creating something on a physical format and leaving your own personal imprint on it" (St. Resp. 4). See Fig. 9 in Appendix 4. Activity #4: Narrating through photographs was classified by

another student as "my favourite activity," which he positively "thought of more like an arts project" (St. Resp. 1). Clearly, in the relatively rigid context of ELTE, activities promoting open creativity were highly valued since they summon students to become, in Augustowsky's (2017) words, "potential filmmakers" (p. 37) or, in this case, photographers.

Last, it should be considered whether the activities developed actually informed ELTE. This is difficult to assess since throughout the experience there seemed to be unclear aims. Activity #1: Watching film clips and Activity #2: Designing timelines and sociograms were basically intended to integrate visual culture to literature. Activity #3: Drawing book covers and Activity #4: Narrating through photographs were suggested as a way to have prospective students develop and display their own artistic abilities. In all of them, however, the recreation of the school context seemed to be clearly intentional. Students used construction paper, markers, and magazines, and they were requested to use their cell phones to produce their own stories. This is not very common in ELTE courses at the university level, excluding during the Practicum, but it will be in their future practice at schools. As one of the students reported, the knowledge and experience of visual culture in the literature class "prepared [her] for future practice because producing visual resources is part of a teacher's work" (St. Resp. 4)." The underlying reasons for her statement clearly stand in agreement not only with Donaghy and Xerri's (2017) proposals for the uses of images in ELT but also with Wallace's (2002) call for the development of literature English at advanced levels in view of its potentiality for communicative language work and critical engagement with the ideas of others. Lastly, working on visually engaging activities does not only help boost students' creativity but also provide them with tools for a better understanding of human experience, which follows Augustowsky's (2017) call to promote the teachers' own artistic production in the hope that they result in rich and creative teaching practices.

Conclusion

We have described in detail here the uses we made of visual culture in the literature class in an ELTE programme in Argentina. This has proved highly motivating and truly enriching for both the prospective teachers and the teacher educator as well. Integrating visual culture to the teaching of English in ELTE not only had a positive impact on the students' reading and interpretation of

literary texts, which stimulated language development at an advanced level, but also encouraged them to put into practice their pent-up creativity. Moreover, they were motivated to experiment with the visual, a mode closer to their everyday experience than the written text, traditionally favoured in the literature class. At the same time, while still developing their English language skills, they had the opportunity to watch, draw, paint, and take pictures, all processes employing tools and materials closer to their future practice than the ones habitually encouraged in academic contexts. Those, in turn, became for them ways of creating beauty, which fortunately made them reconnect with the creation of sensitive knowledge and fostered in them deep reflective thought about art and profession, literature and life.

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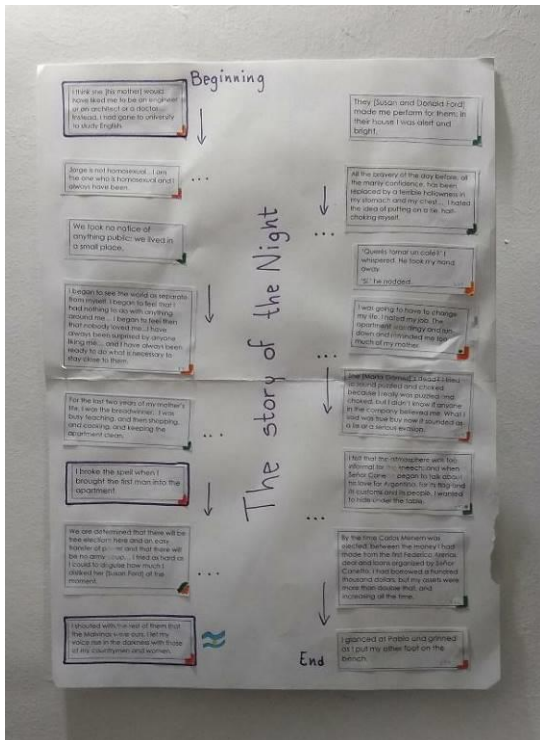
Appendix 1

Figure 1. Timeline for Part 1 of The Story of the Night (Tóibín 1996).
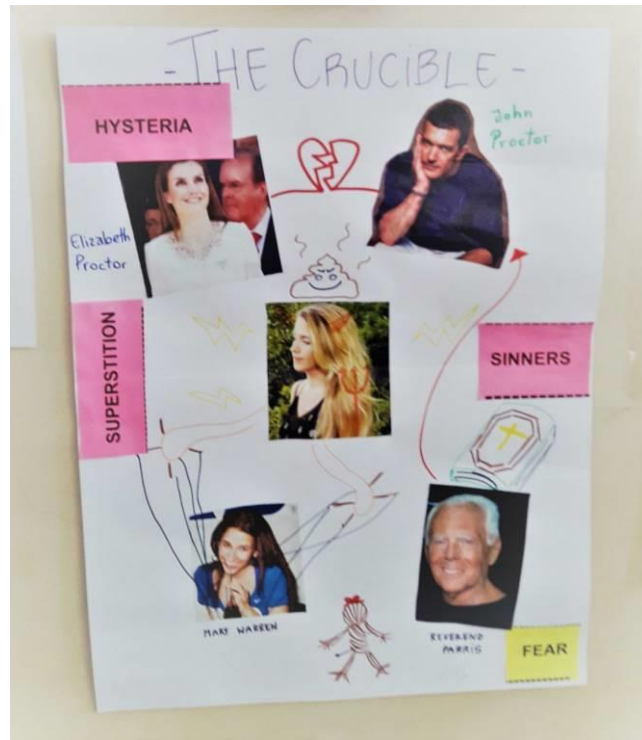

Figure 2. Sociogram for The Crucible (Miller 2016).
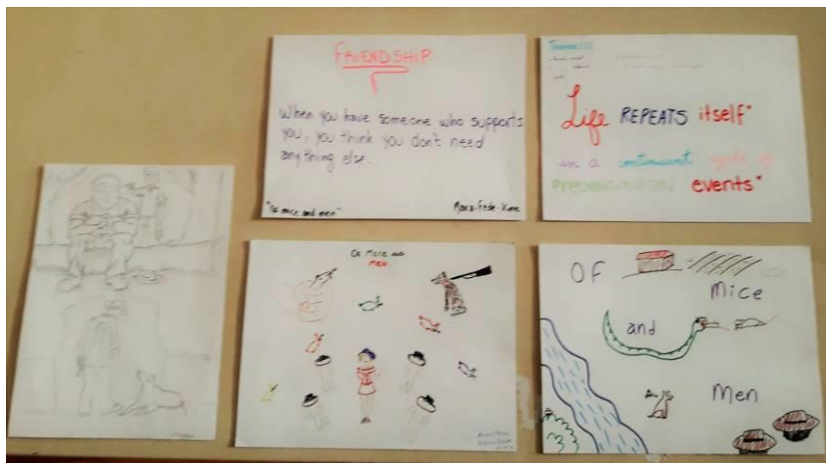
Appendix 2

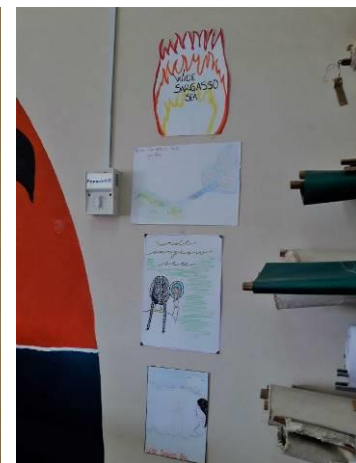Figure 3. Book covers for Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck 1965).

Figure 4. Book covers for Wide Sargasso Sea (Rhys 1965).

Appendix 3

Figure 5. Photograph from the photo-story "Surface Textures," based on Desai (2001).

Figure 6. Photograph from the photo-story "The Spirit of Emulation," based on Sorrentino (n. d.).

Figure 7. Still from the video clip "Eveline," based on Joyce (2008).

Figure 8. Photograph from the photo-story "Cat in the rain,"based on Hemingway (1987).

Appendix 4

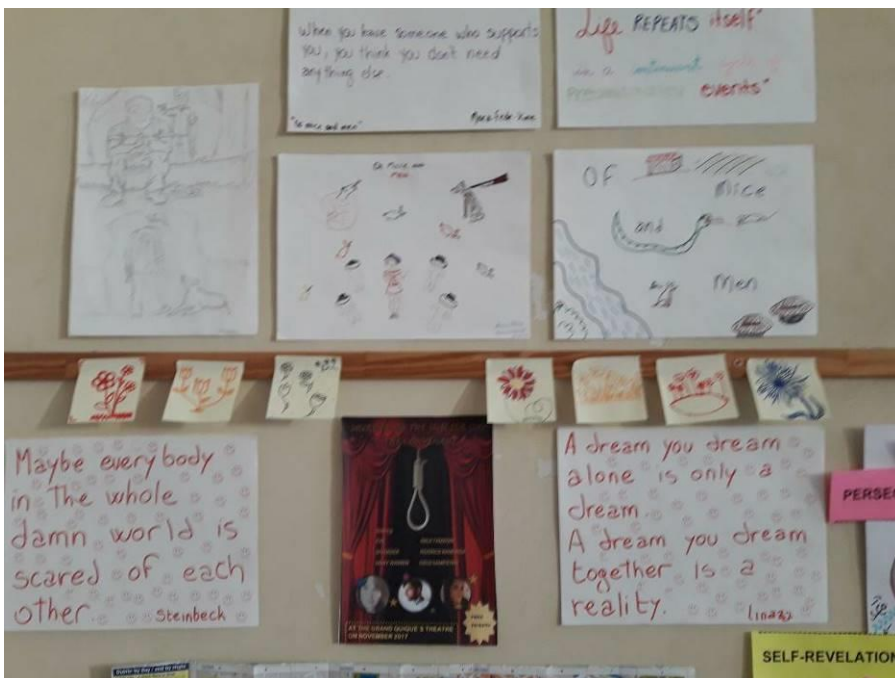Figure 9. Group of students creating a sociogram for The Crucible (Miller 2016).

Figure 10. The arrangement of a classroom wall in October, 2017.