



# Spill the Tea

*Smriti Mehra*

*action research project | UAL PGCert 2025*

My (non-fiction video) art practice involves **ethnographic research** as my primary research method. I believe that first-hand observations in the field and interviews with people about their direct experiences have a very powerful impact that can change the perspectives and narratives on larger issues of **marginalization, labour and material culture**.

My body of work has followed my keen interest in looking at manual labour practices in the **unorganized labour sector in India**. This method of observing lived experience first-hand allows for insights that can only be gleaned through **immersion in the community** and the daily lives of people in the spaces of work that they inhabit.

As an educator my **art practice** and **pedagogic practice** are intrinsically linked. I often bring my own research interests into the classroom.

I am currently the **year 2 leader of the BA Fine Art Photography** program at Camberwell College of Arts and I also teach across course with a focus on using video as a form of presenting research.




I have been working on building a series of **Positionality workshops** across the 3 years on the BA Photography program. There have been various collaborators on this project - *Jheni Arboine, Maia Conran, Olga Saavedra, Kruti Saraiya, Matt Lee, Sucheta Mehra and Claire Undy.*

In photography, the **examination of the self/other** is a key concern of the medium. How do you look at yourself and how do you look at another? **The lens mediates these two positions.** We probe the power dynamics between these positions (*Tien, 2018*). This research project on positionality therefore **speaks to the fundamental concern of our practice: how we look at what we see, in a nuanced, considered and compassionate way.** While examining the self/other, we must preface that we embody both. We are other to another.

These workshops also allow students to get to know each other and to **foster a sense of belonging.** Also importantly, for me to get to know them as a year leader. My approach to facilitating these workshops is to share my positionality with the students and **not be afraid of making myself vulnerable** with them. (*hooks, 1994*)





Students understanding of positionality enables them to **situate themselves** and others with empathy and nuance and therefore increases the agility with which they approach challenges in social and professional situations. It **increases confidence, proactivity and resilience** - individually and collectively. By sharing their narratives they are able to better connect to the narratives of others, this in turn increases connectivity and a sense of belonging in the course overall.

### ***Our Questions***

*How can positionality frame contextualization, interpersonal interaction, academic thinking, and articulation of practice?*

*How can prompts to thinking about positionality be woven into the course at every level, adapting to student development?*

*How does this understanding transcend lens based practice? How can the impact of our interventions be measured?*



## The Positionality Workshop Program

### Year 1

- **Positionality Wheels :**  
defining identities in relation to self and environment (*a workshop designed by Jheni Arboine*)
- **Columbian Hypnosis Workshop (Theatre of the Oppressed) :** the self and its relationship to power
- **Rank Awareness (process work) :**  
interpretation of status through planning a group dinner
- **Point of View exercise :**  
exploring the perspectives of others through points of view

### Year 2

- **The Exquisite Corpse (Edward Gorey) :**  
the whole is greater than the sum of its parts – exploring collaboration
- **Allyship :** owning positionality  
(exploring Trinh T. Minh-Ha's insights about speaking nearby and in relation to the work of Candice Breitz artwork: Love Story 2016)
- **The Object Lesson :** what do personal objects that hold significance to us tell us about ourselves
- **Site and Contextualization:**  
reading artworks in the context of exhibition venues

### Year 3

- **Spill The Tea :** to unpack and reveal different cultural knowings, practices, histories, stories, and rituals of tea in various contexts that students inhabit
  - **Speaking in Riddles :** what idioms in different languages can reveal about the way different cultures process emotions, social interactions, and everyday life
  - **From student to professional :**  
framing professional identity
- Cross Course Studio Intervention**
- **Carnival in Rio :** negotiating and achieving collective resonance



**Idioms are a quintessential part of the English language, and one of the hardest elements for a student of the language to comprehend.** For the English, expressions like ‘tea and sympathy’ or ‘just my cup of tea’ might feel cosy, informal and familiar. **For the non-English speaker, these phrases can be confusing, ostracising- a secret code that cannot be directly translated but must be learned.** Cockney rhyming slang becomes even more cryptic: a reference within a reference, only understandable to those in the know. ‘Tea’ becomes ‘Rosy Lee’, shortened simply to ‘a cup of Rosy’. Tea is one of the most common subjects for idioms in English culture due to its omnipresence in the lives of people of every class, from a ‘builder’s brew’ to ‘tea with the Queen’, drunk with a raised little finger. **Tea has been folded into an impression of Englishness within popular culture,** however the dialogues within the 茶, चाय, Tea (Chá, Chai, Tea) exhibition at the Horniman Museum demonstrate to us that tea is anything but English.

While we may be increasingly familiar with the human cost of the English tea industry, how we address this colonial legacy in the present becomes an uncomfortable question with no singular answer. **Traditionally, postcards are a souvenir of lived experience, capturing something of the ‘foreign’ to share with those back home.** These Spill the Tea postcards (named after another idiom, encouraging people to talk openly) offer **a tool with which to initiate dialogue,** unpacking the appropriation of tea into a popular notion of English culture, and allowing disparate viewpoints and perspectives to co-exist.





## *Aims of the Workshop*

- To use tea, a commodity widely embraced across the globe, as a foundation for unpacking cultural practices surrounding it in the various contexts that students inhabit.
- To use (tea) objects from the Horniman Museum collection as prompts for dialogue and research.
- To examine the histories of tea and its colonial legacies.
- To introduce students to a research methodology by exploring a commodity, its associated histories, the objects it encompasses, and the practice of everyday life, investigating materials and thereby connecting the personal with the political.
- To encourage students to reflect on their own positionality in relation to tea. It is important to consider how local our positions actually are in relation to language, ritual, histories, and practices.
- To create a space for students to share their cultural practices and value their knowledge from lived experience.
- To develop a critical understanding of responding to an archive.
- To foster a sense of belonging within the cohort as students learn more about each other



### *How the intervention speaks to inclusivity*

*This workshop is designed with inclusivity at its core. The student body at UAL is extremely diverse with a large number of international students to whom English is a second language. It employs critical pedagogy to engage with power and inequality, empowerment and agency, dialogical teaching where knowledge is co-constructed, reflective practice (Freire, 1970) and privileging personal cultural practices and lived experience (Ladson-Billings, 1995) for the purpose of transformative education.*



## *Spill The Tea – Positionality Workshop*

*Conducted on 5th November, 2025 by Claire Undy and Smriti Mehra*

Data was collected through 3 different means to try and triangulate and to pull themes from each discussion point, making this action research project a mixed model.

1. The postcards were designed as tools to 'Stretch and Explore' (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007) individual thinking by juxtaposing an idiom with an object from the Horniman archive.

*\*For this activity students were asked to share their thoughts/experiences/ that are auto/biographical to share their lived experiences and knowledge surrounding the rituals, social and everyday practices of tea. They were encouraged to think about what is private (to be kept to themselves) and what is personal (can be shared with an audience) before they began.*

2. These individual responses to the postcards were then shared in a group discussion. I took notes of the discussion and chose not to record it through video or audio so as to facilitate 'Fearless Speech' (Foucault, 2001) within the classroom.

3. Feedback from the discussants was collected through a questionnaire.





## *“A storm in a teacup”*

Porcelain teacup with saucer decorated with overglazed famille rose enamel with peony designs.  
China, 20th Century from the Horniman Collection.

“A storm in a teacup” is an English expression, referring to disproportionate upset being caused by something insignificant.

**What would be a proportionate way to recompense those in the past whose loss or suffering have contributed to the wealth of those in the present?**

Participants split on this going either personal in how they responded or seeing it as a socio-political opinion question.

*“To realize faults and own them. It is important to create connections and associations for the future that no longer support the past.”*

*“Genuinely and firstly - financial reparations. A total seizing of property which is sold to create public goods like museums and support to those who suffered. Maoist response”*



*“As English  
as tea and  
scones”*

Reproduction of an original poster advertising  
Horniman's tea from the Horniman Collection.

“As English as tea and scones”. Many things are described as quintessentially English, such as fish and chips, red telephone boxes, bowler hats and rainy days.

Despite its global origins, tea has become embedded within the British national identity. Stuart Hall wrote about himself and others that moved to Britain as part of the Windrush Generation as *‘the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea’*.

**Is British colonial history a  
quintessential part of our culture?**

Most participants were non-British and positioned themselves *‘on the outside’*, yet some acknowledged British colonial attitudes reflected in their own cultures.

*“It is interesting to speak on this as an outsider to British culture, though of course I'm affected by British colonialism as an American and it is easy to see the concept of westward expansion as a direct succession of British colonial expansion in the name of civilization, assimilation and control. It is not only quintessential to modern British identity but absolutely moored to the flesh of it.”*





Ceramic model of four men, three 'grey beards' and one younger man, eating a meal, seated or kneeling on a bed-table, local name takhta, around a green cloth with a bowl of apples, flat bread and a white teapot. Ceramic, 1990's from the Horniman Collection.

## *"Spill the tea"*

To "spill the tea" means to reveal secrets or insider information that should be kept quiet.

At one time, racist stereotypes were utilised within tea advertising to discourage the British from drinking tea that came from China, in preference for 'pure British' tea, grown in India under British rule.

**In what way does our impression of what tea represents impact our experience of it?**

The most personal of questions elicited very little response, illustrating that the personal was difficult. The only response that was 'personal' was very vulnerable

*"There is definitely a psychological impact. Telling yourself you'll feel better after a good cup of tea starts to make that become true. If we thought of it as something problematic or a product of exploitation, it would stop this."*



## *“Just my cup of tea”*

Porcelain teacup with lid on a brass stand. The cup has a pedestal base and everted rim and is glazed white with red and green decoration: a band of swastika around the rim. Around the walls are four red flowers with green leaves, with between each an inscription in blue. Tibet, 20th Century, from the Horniman Collection.

“Just my cup of tea”- an expression meaning ‘exactly to one’s taste’. There are myriad ways to take tea, shaped by individual preferences, culture and heritage.

**How do your tea preferences reflect your sense of identity?**

Most participants didn’t see themselves as tea drinkers nor did they have any specific connection between identity and tea.

*“I have no personal tea preferences.”*

*“My family drink about a dozen cups per day. They find it confusing that I don’t really like it. Sometimes I say yes to a cup just to stop them offering.”*



*“Not for  
all the tea  
in China”*

Brick of compressed, powdered tea, which is circular with relief decoration on the obverse depicting on the upper half a trade scene with three male figures in a street: A customer is purchasing while the hawker is weighing goods by a steelyard, and another figure is walking away with goods carried in both hands.  
China, 1901-25, from the Horniman Collection.

China is the world's biggest tea producer, accounting for almost half the world's tea production. "Not for all the tea in China" is an expression meaning 'not at any cost', and referring to the vast quantity of tea produced in China, and the potential wealth available through its sale.

**What is the human cost of 'all the tea in China'?**

Participants felt that this required contextual knowledge that they said they didn't have and felt like they could only venture guesses.

*“I'm not sure of the number or facts, but I can presume a lot of underpaid labor and potentially child labor.”*

*“Lost possibilities”*



## *“Tea and sympathy”*

Double spouted teapot and lid with brown glaze and floral patterns on the upper half of the teapot. England, 19th Century from the Horniman Collection.

“Tea and sympathy”, or “tea for two” both suggest ideas of cosiness and intimacy between close friends. Making a cup of tea for someone is an act of care and nurture, a largely symbolic gesture that carves out time for company and conversation.

**Who do you share tea with, and what does it mean to you?**

The social aspects of tea drinking were clearly recognized and related to, many responded with stories of how it is drunk, even if alone.

*“Growing up in Russia, my grandmother used to collect herbs and brew her own tea which she would always share with me, whether in person or by sending me the tea abroad while I studied. Now I drink tea alone, but I still often collect my own herbs, following her recipes.”*

*“I normally only drink tea when I need to think, so I make it for myself when I am writing, and I drink it alone.”*





Album leaf from China, ca 1866. Painted with the process of sieving the tea leaves in order to separate into different grades. Watercolour and ink on pith. From the Horniman Collection.

## “Tea leaf”

“Tea leaf” is Cockney rhyming slang for ‘thief’. Idioms and sayings (particularly Cockney rhyming slang) enfold meaning within a complex set of references and rhymes that appear impenetrable to an outsider, and almost impossible to translate for a non-English speaker.

Tea is a common subject for expressions within the English language, due to its omnipresence in the lives of Brits in every social class- from the working ‘builder’s brew’ to ‘tea with the Queen’.

**What does our language around the subject of tea reveal about the role it plays in our lives?**

There was no unifying theme that could be extracted here.

*“Though tea is such an integral part of everyday life, I’d never considered its relation to language or geography before. The personal is political.”*

*“It is a fairly British approach to act as if we are the origin of everything - the world is centered from our perspective. In our language we speak as if we own it, invented it, brew it.... And bestow it upon the world.”*

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
	<b>Storm in a Teacup</b>	<b>As English As Tea and Scones</b>	<b>Ceramic Model 4 Men 3 Grey Beards</b>	<b>Just My Cup of Tea</b>	<b>Not for All the Tea in China</b>	<b>Tea and Symphy</b>	<b>Tea Leaf</b>	
1	Difficult as the harm / loss grows exponentially over time, reparations should in some way do the same. Investment in infrastructure, etc. feels more appropriate than just financial compensation, though difficult to implement	Very much so but it can be difficult to talk about a single culture when talking about wider global history. Its sometimes easier to thrash or talk out by year or the the queen than some of the more uncomfortable aspects of British history.	There is definitely a psychological impact. Telling yourself you'll feel better after a good cup of tea starts to make that become true. If we thought of it as something problematic or a product of exploitation, it would stop this	My family drink about a dozen cups per day. They find it confusing that I don't really like it. Sometimes I say yes to a cup just to stop them offering.		I normally only drink tea when I need to think, so I make it for myself when I am writing and I drink it alone	It is a fairly British approach to act as if we are the origin of everything - the world is centered from our perspective. In our language we speak as if we own it, invented it, brew it..... And bestow it upon the world.	
2	To realize faults and own them. It is important to create connections and associations for the future that no longer support the past.	As a non-British person, knowing and admitting your country's previous wrong doing is the only way a country can move forward.	Tea and gossip are commonly associated, but in a very gendered way. It is interesting to see men here	I like to collect my own herbs as much as I can. I feel it connects me to nature and its healing properties, and it also reflects my cultural heritage and traditions	I'm not sure of the number or facts, but I can presume a lot of underpaid labor and potentially child labor.	Growing up in Russia, my grandmother used to collect herbs and brew her own tea which she would always share with me, whether in person or by sending me the tea abroad while I studied. Now I drink tea alone, but I still often collect my own herbs, following her recipes	Though tea is such an integral part of everyday life, I'd never considered its relation to language or geography before. The personal is political.	
3	Education from young age	This tells us a lot of the history of England and their sense of history of it, not sharing shame, still a source of pride	Interesting snp now with ideas of authentic and nation making ... a community; graphic design of packages	My tea preferences are not regional / local. I do not drink strong tea and have taste for milder / alternate teas herbal / decaf) Perhaps this says something about class and privilege! - milk tea - prepared with tea, water and milk boiled together		I associate tea with friends and family. Also as a gesture of hospitality. It reminds me of home and takes me back to conversations and memories of those I have lost	Social. It normally defies social categories even though the language surrounding it is exclusionary e.g. tea with the Queen, it is as an object acting as inclusive	
4	Genuinely and firstly - financial reparations. A total seizing of property which is sold to create public goods like museums and support to those who suffered. Maoist / Marxist response	It is interesting to speak on this as an outsider to British culture, though of course I'm affected by British colonialism as an American and it is easy to see the concept of westward expansion as a direct succession of British colonial expansion in the name of civilization, assimilation and control. It is not only quintessential to modern British identity but absolutely moored to the flesh of it.		I cannot answer this as a non tea-drinking American, I assume it has to do with class, however.	An insidious idiom, the only care is product of capital, with true disregard for any sense of humanism for both land it grew upon or those who grew it. Any nation-state, people-group, or persons who defied, questioned or wished to own and produce it for themselves found immediately the feeling of the boot of British subjugation.	I am unable to give this a solid answer, I would assume it can range from an act of intimacy to a move of diplomacy		
5	Meaningful conversations to break down barriers	It is hard to separate colonialism from a colonized country. My first language is English, I studied in a convent. I often reflect on my blindspot as my education is inherently responsible for what I might be in denial of - a colonized mind.	Damage / enlighten / an experience makes an experience more surreal? than once was	I have no personal tea preferences	Lost possibilities	Close friends, friends I haven't seen for a while, gives me comfort over seeing them again	Reveals how we revised our social status // the importance of eating, drinking in lives	
	Participants split on this going either personal in how they responded or seeing it as a socio-political opinion question.	Most participants were non-British and positioned themselves 'on the outside', yet some acknowledged British colonial attitudes reflected in their own cultures.	This extremely personal question elicited very little response, illustrating that the personal was difficult. The only response that was truly 'personal' was, however, very vulnerable	Most participants didn't see themselves as tea drinkers nor did they have any specific connection between identity and tea.	Participants felt that this required contextual knowledge that they said they didn't have and felt like they could only venture guesses	The social aspects of tea drinking were clearly recognized and related to, many responded with stories of how it is drunk, even if alone	There was no unifying theme that could be extracted here	

## Summary of my notes from the group discussion

- There was a rich discussion of what histories we learned in our school curriculums – in **Russia, USA, UK and India**.
- We identified the narratives that prevail in **different contexts**.
- The topic of toppling statues came up – what is decolonisation- contested histories – Churchill – one nation's hero and another nation's villain.
- We discussed what the **Commonwealth** is.
- There was agreement in the group about the importance of admitting faults and that **histories are muddy**.
- We spoke about history and historiography.
- We distinguished between the kettle and pan in relation to tea preparation. The **east vs west** traditional or cultural methods of boiling water and brewing tea.
- **Kettle** – Used to boil water. In many tea-drinking cultures, a kettle is essential for heating water before pouring it over tea leaves.
- **Pan** – In some traditions, a pan (or pot) might be used to brew tea directly, especially for methods that involve simmering tea leaves, spices, or herbs (such as in Chinese, Tibetan, or Indian chai preparation).
- We also spoke about **tea leaves** (eastern practice) and tea bags (western / convenient).
- Tea and its relation to time.
- Tea in relation to **fortune telling**.
- We learned that tea is not predominant in America.
- Tea as a hot beverage vs sweetened iced tea popular in the southern states of America.
- The **opium wars** coincided with the American Civil War.





A	B	C	D	E	F	
	Worked Well Enjoyed	Find Challenging	Improved / change what	Other contexts	Three Take Aways	
1				Other every-day things taken for granted, have a social and political context that varies geographically : e.g. clenders and how time is measured; other objects or furniture		
2	Conversations around colonialism and history and facts versus truth behind cultures	Lacked details about British culture; lack of knowledge about the history of tea	Give more context on British tea relations; understand how other countries were affected	Perceptions of 'art' is different parts of the world as this varies dramatically based on culture and politics	Churchill caused Bengal famine; British had prejudice towrds Chinese tea	
3	The prompts / images were a great starting point as it helped me realize how much I actully do know / associate with the topic	Acknowledging my biases and understandin the weight of the language associated with the discussion		Enjoyed how much we talked about social / cultural language and how important it is and what using certain words / phrases means and the weight of them	Importance of perspective and opinion; beyond related social / cultural vitals 'kettle versus pan'; ; to continue challenging / discussion these familiar and taken for granted topics	
4	I think an open table discussion is always fabulous. Getting people excited to tlk about wanty? And learning perspective is key to the process of contextual art prctuce	My own cultural understanding of tea and other various Britishisms	Sitting in a circle to increase focus towrds each other; providing readings and quotes; discussing how we can take this into practice	I'd love on the modes of gaze or lenses or perspectives in the reading of history	Made me curious about slave owner statues in the UK; great conversation about global perspectives of history, in detail understanding of lack of teaching of colonialism and process of decolonialiation; histories in the sense of the personal / actual - always nice to be reminded of this	
5	Dicussion was easier than the note taking because I heard many different phrases? accents? sides / cultures which I wasn't familiar with	I don't know enough about tea or have as much an intense relationship to it as do my friends, it was challenging to answer with a personal touch		Familiar visual and cultural like / places round the world	Histories / practices are differeing and constantly volving	



## **Worked Well**

*"The prompts / images were a great starting point as it helped me realize how much I actually do know / associate with the topic."*

*"Discussion was easier than the note taking because I heard many different phrases? accents? sides / cultures which I wasn't familiar with"*

## **Found Challenging**

*"Acknowledging my biases and understanding the weight of the language associated with the discussion."*

*"I don't know enough about tea or have as much an intense relationship to it as do my friends, it was challenging to answer with a personal touch"*

## **To improve**

*"Give more context on British tea relations; understand how other countries were affected"*

*"Sitting in a circle to increase focus towards each other"*

## **Other contexts to explore**

*"Other every-day things taken for granted, have a social and political context that varies geographically: e.g. calendars and how time is measured; other objects or furniture"*

*"I'd love on the modes of gaze or lenses or perspectives in the reading of history"*

*"Familiar visual and cultural like / places round the world"*



## *Key Takeaways from the workshop*

*“Importance of perspective and opinion; beyond related social / cultural vitals 'kettle versus pan'; to continue challenging / discussion these familiar and taken for granted topics”*

*“Made me curious about slave owner statues in the UK; great conversation about global perspectives of history, in detail understanding of lack of teaching of colonialism and process of decolonialiation; histories in the sense of the personal / actual - always nice to be reminded of this”*

*“Histories / practices are differeing and constantly volving”*



**Figure 1.2.**Eight Studio Habits of Mind

We present the Habits of Mind in an oval because they are non-hierarchical, so none logically comes first or last. The habits do not operate and should not be taught in a set sequence that privileges one or another over the others. Instead, one can begin with any habit and follow its generative energy through dynamic, interacting habit clusters that animate studio experiences as they unfold.

**Understand Art Worlds**

**Domain:** Learning about art history and current practice  
**Communities:** Learning to interact as an artist with other artists (i.e., in classrooms, in local arts organizations, and across the art field) and within the broader society

**Develop Craft**

**Technique:** Learning to use tools (e.g., viewfinders, brushes), materials (e.g., charcoal, paint); learning artistic conventions (e.g., perspective, color mixing)  
**Studio Practice:** Learning to care for tools, materials, and space

**Engage and Persist**

Learning to embrace problems of relevance within the art world and/or of personal importance, to develop focus and other mental states conducive to working and persevering at art tasks

**Stretch and Explore**

Learning to reach beyond one's capacities, to explore playfully without a preconceived plan, and to embrace the opportunity to learn from mistakes and accidents

**Envision**

Learning to picture mentally what cannot be directly observed and imagine possible next steps in making a piece

**Reflect**

**Question and Explain:** Learning to think and talk with others about an aspect of one's work or working process  
**Evaluate:** Learning to judge one's own work and working process, and the work of others in relation to standards of the field

**Express**

Learning to create works that convey an idea, a feeling, or a personal meaning

**Observe**

Learning to attend to visual contexts more closely than ordinary "looking" requires, and thereby to see things that otherwise might not be seen



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## My Summary (reflections from the workshop)

*My first response was that I felt like the conversations went in many different directions and it seemed hard to control as a facilitator.*

*Claire's thought that this was the strength of the exercise.*

*On further rumination I remembered 'Eight Studio Habits of the Mind' (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007) and that aiming to 'Stretch and Explore' engages and challenges the mind.*

*This is the point of the exercise. Though I felt a loss of control over the discussion, the next time I will be mindful of enjoying how it spans and spreads in many directions.*

*Facilitating the exercise could be refined by mind-mapping the discussion in class with the students. This will allow us to summarise our thoughts better in conclusion of the activity.*



## *What brough me joy*

- There were many palpable a-ha moments during the discussion. I must specifically ask for these insights the next time I do this exercise. The most prominent of them were ones about the histories they learned of from each other's perspectives.
- When quiet voices spoke up in the discussion and in the absence of verbal articulation, quizzical looks and laughs were also equally happy signs of participation.
- All participants willingly gave me their written responses to keep.
- Designing this workshop gave me clarity on developing the next workshop - 'Speaking in Riddles'.

## *Challenges*

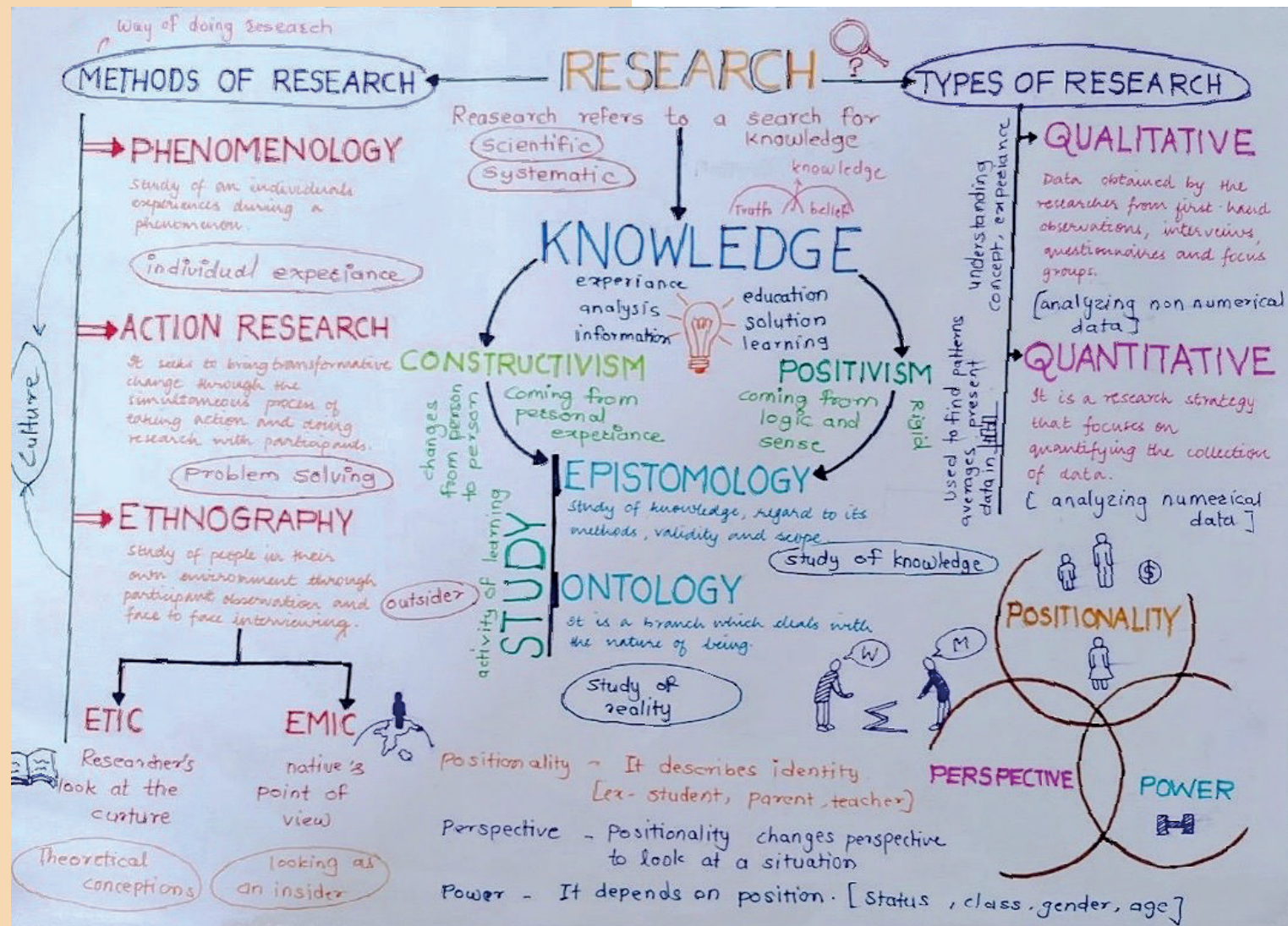
- Analysing the data I collected in this workshop has been challenging for me. There were a total of six participants including Claire and me – not enough responses to feel confident of my analysis.
- Quite a bit of the handwriting was hard to decipher.
- There is a challenge in setting the level of the workshops and seminars to be appropriately intellectually challenging.
- Where best to situate interventions in terms of the student timetable.
- How to embed the learning within units and move away from the sessions being considered additional.





## Further considerations

Clarifying where positionality lies in terms of research



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*Smriti Mehra*

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