Cognitive mapping

What is it?

This technique involves asking participants to draw a space. It can be something physical (e.g. 'Draw the University') or more digital (e.g. 'Draw the library website'). The idea is that people will depict the aspects that are important to them, giving you an insight into their use of a particular space and the emotions they associate with it, such as enjoyment or annoyance!

Things you need

- A couple of sheets of A3 paper per participant (students or staff)
- Three different colours for each participant (e.g. red, blue, green)
- Number of participants: usually 1 but it is possible to run it with 2+ people
- An environment with tables so the participants have something to rest on
- A stopwatch (a watch or smartphone is fine)
- Red, blue and black whiteboard pens

How to do it

1. Start by giving your participants a topic and then some basic instructions, e.g. 'I'd like you to draw your favourite place to work. Please work individually. I want you to start drawing in **red** pen, then after 2 minutes I'm going to ask you to change to **blue** pen for 2 minutes, then I'll ask you to switch to **black** pen for the final 2 minutes.' Make sure you keep your instructions brief to avoid influencing what they draw. Stress this is not an artistic exercise and they won't be judged on what they draw.

2. Ask participant/s to start drawing in **red** and set off your stopwatch.

3. After 2 minutes, ask them to change to **blue**.
4. After 2 more minutes, ask them to change to **black**.
5. After the final 2 minutes (6 minutes altogether), ask everyone to stop drawing.
6. Next, do not try to interpret the maps but ask people to talk about what they've drawn in each colour and jot down any common themes. You could also, with the permission of your participants, record the session. The themes in red are what people drew early on and are very likely to be the things that mattered most to them. Those in blue are probably a bit less important to them, and things in black might be afterthoughts but still mattered enough for people to include them in their drawings. Think as well about what you thought they might draw but <u>didn't</u>; that can be just as significant. You might want to collect people's cognitive maps for later analysis as well, but make sure you let participants know in advance if you're going to do that. Even so, some people might not want to hand theirs in and that's fine.