Me-ifestos for Visualization Empowerment in Teaching (and Learning?)

A submission to alt.VIS 2022
With contributions from participants at Dagstuhl Seminar 22261 (June 2022)

Abstract

One sunny June afternoon in a remote castle deep in Saarland, a group of visualization researchers of many stripes — from different countries, disciplines and generations — came together to discuss teaching and learning in visualization. Our first order of business in Saarland was to develop a shared vision: a manifesto of sorts that would guide us towards strategies to broaden data visualization skills, make them more common and accessible, and enable this empowerment. That exercise failed. Instead of creating one shared manifesto (who are we to do that, anyway?), we took a different, more personal approach. We found inspiration in others’ manifestos, we crafted individual value and commitment statements ("me-ifestos"), we shared these with each other and reflected on them. The process of writing these commitment statements was illuminating and motivating. It was a positive experience with such visceral effects that we want to share the feeling with the visualization community. And so we share a collection of "me-feito" excerpts from the authors and a call to action: we request that readers craft and share their own.
Me-ifestos for Visualization Empowerment in Teaching (and Learning?)

One sunny June afternoon in a remote castle deep in Saarland, a group of visualization researchers of many stripes — from different countries, disciplines and generations — came together to discuss teaching and learning in visualization. We had built democratizing websites to make datasets openly available [7, 16], to encourage discourse in communities [12], posted pre-prints online so that people could read our work for free and felt the warm glow of satisfaction that comes from a student getting the data vis bug. We thus found our common desire to empower the people with whom we interact so that they can understand and use data in their lives. Our first order of business in Saarland was to develop a shared vision: a manifesto of sorts that would guide us towards strategies to broaden data visualization skills, make them more common and accessible, and enable this empowerment.

That exercise failed.

It did not fail because we could not agree. It failed because what we felt most strongly about reflected our individual contexts, values, and goals. Some of us were university lecturers leading modules with varied numbers of students at different levels, some were teaching assistants with less agency and more focused responsibilities, others taught informally through research work or in large organizations. Some of us came at this from a perspective of enabling democracy, some with a passion for the visual and a desire to use this as inspiration for others, some with a broad goal of empowerment and understanding for all.

As is often the case, out of our initial failure emerged something that we found thought-provoking and worth sharing with the VIS community. Instead of creating one shared manifesto (who are we to do that, anyway?), we took a different, more personal approach. Instead of adding another manifesto to the collection of excellent and inspiring manifestos that exist, we took time to read them, process them, share them and anchor some individual and collective reflection. We thought about their contents, discussed their approaches, decided what they taught us about ourselves, our own experiences and attitudes, and identified statements that resonated with us individually. We used this thinking to draft individual visualization “me-ifestos”, or personal commitments about how to empower others through data visualization. We took some time, thought some more, and then shared these drafts with one another.

What surprised us was how deeply revealing the ensuing discussion was about our values and desires for the world. Reflecting on what it means to empower people made us ask, what do we want to empower people to do?, how can we best do that?, and even what is best?. The answers highlighted the situated understandings of empowerment, ranging from constructivist teaching and physicalization, to co-design and policy intervention. The variety in our approaches reflected the variety in our backgrounds, and the different situations through which we personally felt we could approach the task of strengthening visualization empowerment in others.

Seeing others’ statements helped us understand each other in ways that surprised us. It made us want to revise or add to some of our own. Instead of creating one shared manifesto, we created a shared collection of value statements and commitments that we could mix and remix to help ourselves gain clarity about why we cared about empowering people with data visualization — and what we might prioritize to do so.

The process of writing these commitment statements was illuminating and motivating. It was a learning activity for and about ourselves. Sharing the statements brought us together from across our various practices. This was a positive experience with such visceral effects that we want to share the feeling with the visualization community. And so in the following pages, we share a collection of “me-ifesto” excerpts from the authors and a call to action: a request that you craft and share your own.
**Me-ifesto Exercise**

**COFFEE:** Stop — get a drink, find an hour to commit to some thinking.

**CHECK:** Read through some of the manifestos we have found and personal statements we have crafted. Find others for yourself. Read your own manifesto if you have one.

**CONSIDER:** What do you value? What do you believe in? Which of these statements resonate and which don’t?

**CRAFT:** Adopt, adapt, or create some statements that describe your values.

**COMMIT:** Make personal commitments to actions or intentions that guide you to empower people through visualization.

Feel free to use, borrow, or remix existing manifestos and add your own.

---

**ME-IFESTO MANUFACTURE**

Making a me-ifesto? It’s straightforward, so let’s get down to it!

We’d like you to find an hour in your day to engage with the *Me-ifesto exercise* that you can see right here (left, here) by stopping, and considering what values and/or commitments you want to make to your visualization practice.

The more voices are heard, and the more perspectives seen, the more powerful this exercise becomes. *So we really need you!*

Where do you start from?

Well, maybe you have explicit statements that describe personal commitments to actions or intentions that you use to guide your efforts to empower people through visualization?

If so, then take these statements, reflect on them and revise them through our proposed process.

If not, well, that’s interesting!

Why not?

We invite and indeed encourage you to spend an hour producing Draft 0, which you can revise as you develop and as your experiences and perspectives and statements shape your approach.

And you know what?

We want you to do this **RIGHT NOW.**

Really!

Right away!

It will take you an hour. So use the next hour!

The one you were going to spend reading this paper (which turns out to be a bit shorter than you were expecting).

At the end of this paragraph we want you to stop reading.

And then follow the big yellow arrow and start doing the *Me-ifesto exercise* by following the 5 steps.

Firstly, **STOP READING** and get coffee (or something). You likely have a nice coffee machine. Or if not, there’s that place down the road — the one with the friendly barista and the tempting overpriced cakes. Head there now and get a drink! (and a cake)

Because, we’re going to get you to do something you don’t usually do when reviewing or reading a paper once you have calmed down and made some thinking space and have your drink in hand.

We’re gonna get you to do some **THINKING!**

About yourself, and your role, and your values and how you fit in.

And then we’re gonna get you to do some **WRITING!**

About your values, intentions, hopes and expectations, to help you develop your own statements and commitments.

---

Use the *Me-ifesto exercise* and the pages that follow to express your values, develop your statements and begin to commit!
Inspiration and Counter-Inspiration

We collectively drew upon many other manifestos to help us articulate our values and commitments.
I believe that visualization is both a process and an outcome and that both are valuable conclusions to projects.

I will endeavour to expose my biases, knowledge gaps and assumptions.

I recognize that data, software, models, and their outputs (including visualizations) are never entirely neutral or objective.

I will advocate for designers, instructors and learners to probe the deeper conceptual structure of their target to-be visualised topic beyond the overt structure of the given data.

I will reach out to a citizen science project to find out what they need from visualization.

Eu me comprometo a promover um pensamento crítico e a considerar diferentes corpos no ensino, aprendizagem e criação de visualizações de dados.
I will endeavour to demonstrate (through my practice) and espouse (through my teaching) the obligation to be **truthful, trustworthy, and accessible**, in all data visualisation design.

I will **revisit and develop** my commitments and guiding statements in light of their use and those of others.

**I am committed to continuously reflect on my own role in data visualization including its ethical and societal aspects and inspire others to do so.**

As an educator and a designer, I commit to spreading the idea that data visualization is created by people, for people, and about people, but can — and should — include non-human beings. I also acknowledge that people have strengths, limits, and biases.

I will use data visualization as a **process** to develop meaningful questions in both teaching and learning.

**I endeavour to encourage children’s experiences of data visualization by balancing creativity, play and education.**

I endeavour to help people see their data and their views in a broader context.

On a foundational level, I believe in the student’s eagerness to learn, their passion to explore, and their capabilities to create.

J’aimerais pouvoir aider les humains que je rencontre à construire, designer, analyser, jouer, et communiquer de nouvelle représentations (visuel, mental et/ou conceptuel) du monde qui nous entour afin qu’on le comprenne **mieux ensemble.**

As an educator, I am committed to teaching/learning data visualization theories and practices rooted in **critical thinking** processes and **ethical design** approaches.
I believe everyone can “do visualization”. Even though there is little formal education. Every student of visualization brings some experience of some kind and contributes a new perspective to the field of visualization.

As an educator in visualization, this is what I learn from learners. It challenges me to rethink visualization each time. Our knowledge as well as approaches to it are constantly evolving as we engage with people around visualization. In my teaching, I want students to see this richness, to be passionate about what they do, and to think critically, creatively, and independently.

I envision a strong VIS community whose core values are excellence, rigor, but also creativity, openness, diversity, and inclusion.

As an educator, I am committed to reflecting along with students on the power and beauty of data visualisation, and the responsibility that comes with it.

We provide motivation by demonstrating reasons for chosen teaching goals.

We teach students their responsibility to produce expressive, efficient and effective visualizations.

We strive to offer students the chance to actively participate and contribute to their own learning experience.

We acknowledge the variety of solutions in (teaching) visualization.

We aim to recognize every student’s individual learning progress by helping them achieve their individual visualization visions and learning goals.

I will empower people from diverse backgrounds to embrace the uncertainties in data and leverage them for critical thinking through data visualization.

I will always contribute and strive for constructing an inclusive, inviting, fair, and tolerant VIS learning space.

I value teaching students the ethics of conducting research, including valuing different contributions, particularly when working in an inter/multi-disciplinary group.
I believe...
COMMIT: Add a commitment statement here.

I will...
MEIFESTO SHARING

Now that you have made your Meifesto, we’d like you to consider sharing it so that it can inform others as they take the same journey you have embarked upon. While the format through which we will call on people to share has yet to be decided, perhaps, dear reviewer, you would like us to include your Meifesto within this paper? If so, please include it with your other comments.

CONCLUSION

Well, we are not in a position to conclude anything yet. We’re partway through a process and hope that you have contributed to it by doing the thinking that we asked of you in the meifesto exercise. Despite not being in a position to conclude, however, we do think that we have made some progress in terms of thinking about and developing our values and approaches to using visualization for empowerment in teaching and learning. Evidently, we think that this is worth reporting. This is our effort to get others involved in some of this thinking and the discussion around it.

So... the exercise?


did you do it?

If not, might you do it in the future?

If so, might you do it in the future again?

We hope so — we found it very valuable.

Or maybe you are struggling to write a commitment or a value statement?

If you are uncertain about committing to a meifesto, might we offer you permission to stop and acknowledge where you are. Try something else to help. Perhaps imagine an acknowledgment, an invitation, an aspiration, a toast, a question, a limerick, a wish, or a pun that might guide your practice as a teacher or a learner.

We might not have a manifesto that we can all agree on and sign. However, we do all feel that we know ourselves and each other, our values and how we do or do not fit in, much more fully. We were actually quite surprised: despite our various collective efforts to democratise data visualization and attendance at a workshop on empowerment in teaching, few of us had explicit statements of value and intent — or commitments to behave in particular ways — that addressed these objectives. What we have is still partial, but we have begun to discuss these issues and feel that this is taking us somewhere.

We therefore prefer to end on a series of open questions on the value of this exercise, on how we might take it forward, and where you have embarked upon. While the format through which we will discuss these issues and feel that this is taking us somewhere.

In short, this paper isn’t really about us, it’s about you — your values, approaches, commitments, and actions. Finding them, exposing them, questioning them, developing them. So, dear reader, valued alt.vizzer, you are the most important part of these questions now. Even though we don’t know where this will all end up, we feel as though it’s likely to take us somewhere interesting. Somewhere that helps us help the learners who we strive to empower through our visualization activity and teaching. We’d like to know how it feels to you, whether you agree, whether you have counter-arguments or different experiences and whether we can get you on board. Let us know what you think.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank the Dagstuhl Seminar 22261, “Visualization Empowerment: How to Teach and Learn Data Visualization,” its organizers (Benjamin Bach, Sheelagh Carpendale, Uta Hinrichs, and Samuel Huron), and participants for their company, collegiality, ideas, deep discussions and their intense passion for teaching that so inspired us in Saarland.

REFERENCES