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EDITORIAL

Visual literacy practices in higher education: what, why and how?

A bilingual five-year-old girl is trying to explain to her mother what she was doing at gymnastics class. Despite her best efforts to overcome the excitement, speaking a mixture of two languages and not yet perfect pronunciation, the mother is left totally puzzled. However, the child does not give up. She takes a piece of paper with a colour pencil and starts drawing gymnastics' activities one-by-one, adding some oral explanation to indicate action, the movement of people and objects in the drawing. This visual clarification helped, and mother finally comprehends the information that was initially communicated only orally.

The above anecdote is yet further evidence supporting the claim that in some contexts, images work better than words. They are useful aids for daily communication practices. This also demonstrates that the ability in 'showing seeing' is employed already in early years, and thus, it has a potential for further development. Visual education is usually widely present in pre-school and early school education but quickly diminishes thereafter. Finally, in university education, text and oral instructions tend to take over almost completely. In addition, visual education is often associated with artistic and visual fields of study, and as such, it is rarely considered as the basic knowledge and competency that should be further developed in all disciplines.

The nature of today's communication is overwhelmingly visual. Images, as modes of communication, play a dominant role in our daily activities and are especially prominent in the lives of young people. Today's students were born in image-saturated environments, the era of internet, digital technologies and touchscreens. Their communication practices are mediated visually, including photo and video creation and sharing, video chatting, and the visual language of emoticons, GIFs, and emojis. However, the moment students enter university classrooms, they are thrown into almost a completely textual world. Such highly textual context may cause an alienation from the course material and content. In consequence, contemporary millennial and post-millennial generations, although usually technologically savvy, are often visually illiterate. They do not know how to interpret and evaluate images and how to use them for effective communication (Brumberger, 2011; Emanuel, Baker, & Challons-Lipton, 2016). This fact poses significant challenges to educators, who often take students' competency in image production and (critical) evaluation for granted. In a world saturated by images, we are still more skillful in dealing with words rather than with visual imagery.

Benefits of visual literacy education

The variety of literacies for the twenty-first century is growing rapidly, including, for example, digital media literacies (Buckingham, 2007; Reyna, Hanham, & Meier, 2018), multimodal literacy (Serafini, 2014), digital competency (Ferrari, 2012), digital literacy (Hobbs, 2017), or even social media literacies (Rheingold, 2010). With this special issue, however, we want to draw attention to the visual literacy that should be primary in the twenty-first century higher education. Images have the potential to become *lingua franca* of our daily

communication, especially amongst the younger generations. Thus, tertiary education should take advantage of visual modes of knowledge and knowing by introducing at least some elements of visual literacy education across all disciplines (ACRL, 2011; Bleed, 2005; Felten, 2008).

Contributions to this special issue, as well as our personal teaching practice, reveal certain benefits of visual literacy education at the tertiary level. Firstly, visuals help in knowledge acquisition and assist in a better understanding of the course content. Teaching visually helps develop the students' creativity, and thus, opens new learning possibilities. Images enhance memory, which benefits the learning process. Image-based learning helps in expressing thoughts and opinions, which are often provoked or inspired by visual clues.

Visual literacy education is a long-term project, especially if implemented on the side of subject teaching. Hence, the occasional and random usage of images of any kind, without clearly stated aims and learning objectives, will serve as an exotic addition to the typical teaching mode and should be avoided. On the contrary, with this special issue, we aim to demonstrate that visually-led teaching does not need to occur as an exception, but can become a common practice within universities. The contributors of this special issue show that by applying visual activities in the classroom, it allows new creative possibilities for both teachers and students. Visual education helps in breaking teaching routines and enhances learning. This special issue is compiled on the basis of the argument that visual literacy should be included as part of the basic education in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Being aware of the various definitions applied in literature, we understand visual literacy quite broadly. Following Kędra's (2018) review of visual literacy definitions, we indicate three categories of skills: visual reading, visual writing, and other visual literacy skills. Visual reading covers skills of image interpretation/analysis, evaluation, visual perception, knowledge of visual grammar and syntax and learned ability in visual-verbal translation. Visual writing covers skills in visual creation, image production and use, and in effective visual communication. Other visual literacy skills include visual thinking and learning skills and applied image use (such as using images ethically). Contributions of this special issue mirror the multidisciplinary character of the concept of visual literacy. Thus, each article looks at the visual literacy from a slightly different perspective, discussing the proposed teaching activity within that specific frame.

Aims of the special issue

This special issue is a result of a number of long and detailed discussions regarding each submission. As guest editors, we aimed to bring forward the need for visual literacy education in the university curriculum, by representing different disciplinary backgrounds and with various teaching experience. We were particularly interested in the teaching practices employed to develop visual literacy skills across fields of study, which we called innovative teaching ideas for visually-led activities. Learning, particularly in visual education, occurs via experience. As such, learning is not only about knowledge acquisition. It also requires a number of hands-on activities. We hope that the proposed contributions will introduce a variety of exercises in a manner that can be easily applicable to other teaching contexts. The reader should find interesting and inspiring suggestions to develop their own visual pedagogies in university classrooms.

Papers included in this special issue represent a variety of disciplines: social and educational sciences, language studies, photography, business, media and communication, visual culture studies and library and information science. They have contributed to the analysis

of the linkages between visual research, visual literacy, innovative teaching practices and have made this multidisciplinary volume possible.

Contributions

The opening article by Asko Lehmuskallio introduces us to *the look as a medium*. Lehmuskallio presents four analytical dimensions of visual phenomena that integrate the knowledge gained by various research methods and bridge the gap between the image and its contextual use. As visual phenomena are seen differently in various situations and by different onlookers, the focus to the look as a medium 'encourages paying attention to what gets seen, and in which ways' (Lehmuskallio, this issue). Since both looking and interpreting the visual require learning, Lehmuskallio suggests an exercise to train the look that provides insights on visuality, seeing and visual cultures. Focusing on the look as a medium is valuable for a wide array of disciplines and could be used in various visual literacy courses.

Gary McLeod applies the *learning through looking at* approach in photography studies and provides insight into rephotography as an educational practice from both macro and micro perspectives. At the macro level, the article presents a multidisciplinary overview of rephotography. In a micro-scale, it follows rephotographing practices of three MA photography students, analyzing process, result and reflections on learning. McLeod (in this issue) sees 'rephotographing as an explicit visual pedagogy' that can be useful in developing visual skills in multiple fields and 'offers immersion in plenitude as it is happening'.

Terry Loerts and Christina Belcher suggest another teaching idea that introduces students to the world of visuals. In their article, the authors demonstrate the importance of *visual journaling* in teacher education and how visual elements can be incorporated into literacy courses. According to Loerts and Belcher, visual journaling allows students to be 'agentive in making meaning' which strengthens their critical thinking, interpretation and collaboration skills. Whilst at the same time it challenges a deep-rooted belief that literacy is mainly about reading and writing. Experimenting with new modes of literacy has enabled teacher candidates in Loerts' and Belcher's classrooms to transform their practices and to 'reflect and respond' to learning in a more agentive way.

Wendy R. Williams, nevertheless, emphasizes that students lack the *visual vocabulary* which would help them to discuss a variety of visual texts and to provide structures for thinking visually. Williams suggests that students should work with various types of visual material to develop their visual literacy and proposes *a toolkit of art and design concepts* to discuss the artistry and design of visual works. The paper demonstrates how improved visual vocabulary liberates creative and interpretative potency of storytellers and gives them more power to express their perceptions.

This ability to express ideas visually is very important in today's life. Jeeyoung Min points out that visual literacy should have practical implications. Min analyses the *verbal-to-visual transmediation practices* and suggests that students learn to construct meaning and master how to communicate it whilst using both verbal and visual elements through the four-fold process of noticing, conceptualizing, constructing, and conveying. Min also argues that such multimodal composing practices should be incorporated into an institution-wide preparatory writing program, since practical visual literacy skills are necessary for the future job market.

Suriati Abas offers a *visual-to-verbal transmediation* activity built around Serafini's (2014) pedagogical framework that incorporates the additional step of self-reflection as well as interactive collaborative activities making use of contemporary digital means (Google docs,

memos). The proposed course plan for visual analysis essay writing offers students a possibility to enhance their meaning-making skills through visual-to-verbal transmediation. At the same time, it raises their awareness of 'how image producers or creators use particular elements to communicate specific meaning' (Abas, this issue).

Dana Statton Thompson shifts our attention to the critical evaluation of meaning and stresses the importance of distinguishing between shallow and deep images. She also proposes a Digital Image Guide (DIG) Method as a means to *dig deeper into an image*. After the stages of analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and comprehension the students learn how to critically read visual content online instead of relying on their surface-level awareness. This opportunity to engage with images at a deeper level and the ability to critically evaluate images should support a better assessment of the visual information which students encounter on the daily basis.

A different approach on working with photographs is proposed by Choon-Lee Chai in his adaptation of *photo elicitation practice* in sociology classes. The photo elicitation assignment which is designed around a specific social issue intends to enhance visual writing and thinking skills. Moreover, it enriches visualization practices of everyday experiences and facilitates the meaning-making process among undergraduate students. The activity, with the help of innovative sensory poem, 'increases the affective domain of student learning' (Chai, this issue) and at the same time stimulates reflectivity through the SHOWeD Method.

Vered Heruti delves deeper into the affective domain of visuals and proposes an activity that stimulates introspective self-expression through the analysis of *a meaningful personal photograph*. The challenge of multi-identity classroom raised a need for dialogic pedagogy as well as accommodation of both heterogeneous personal and cultural identities. The visual tasks and online tools that Heruti has employed in the pedagogical-visual process facilitated in-class dialogue and allowed the students to develop their visual literacy skills from 'personal reading of the photograph to cultural connotation' (Heruti, this issue).

The *freehand drawing activity*, introduced by Gyuzel Gadelshina, Arrian Cornwell and David Spoors, offers another distinct method to approach a particular social phenomenon, such as corruption. The contributors propose a classroom activity that aims to develop and improve visual writing skills that are quite rare in visual education. Contrary to the popular trend of technology-based teaching, the authors propose a seemingly simple freehand drawing activity that stimulates knowledge construction and critical thinking. Moreover, according to the authors, such activity can 'provide insights into students' level of comprehension of a complex social phenomenon' (Gadelshina, Cornwell & Spoors, this issue).

Last but not least, Rosalina Pisco Costa draws our attention to the visual methodologies and *visual forms of data registration* in the qualitative inquiry. The author challenges the notion of private and non-private in terms of contemporary technological tools and proposes an activity that encourages students to use smartphone technologies for small-scale ethnographic research. The paper points out the wide spectrum of possibilities that an everyday (and private) device may bring into the teaching context, most important of which is generating manifold image-based research records that are indispensable to qualitative researchers.

Visual literacy in the context of higher education

The contributors of this special issue underline that visual literacy is essential in today's world. They also attest to the fact that being widely exposed to visuals does not mean to be visually literate (Brumberger, 2011). The visual literacy skills, therefore, have to be

explicitly taught. Nevertheless, as shown in the papers (for example, Williams; Loerts & Belcher or Min), the strategies for teaching are lacking, underdeveloped or sporadic and are not 'a priority for some teachers due to unfamiliarity with visual literacy learning' (Loerts & Belcher, this issue).

Visual literacy skills, as shown in this special issue, have an empowering effect (see: Loerts & Belcher or Williams), creativity stimulation (see: Chai; Loerts & Belcher; McLeod or Williams) and meaning-making enhancing (see: Abas; Chai; Costa; Loerts & Belcher or Min) capabilities, while they also cultivate individual uniqueness through reflection and personal experiences (for example, article by Chai; Heruti or Loerts & Belcher) and emphasize active construction of knowledge (articles by Chai; Gadelshina, Cornwell & Spoors or Loerts & Belcher). Whereas art-based teaching techniques can help us understand how students comprehend complex social phenomena, as pointed out by Gadelshina, Cornwell and Spoors, or current socio-political issues, as illustrated by Abas, they can also assist in the tailoring of educational programs and classroom material. On the other hand, using familiar personal photographs or creating visuals, helps students to better conceptualize and internalize the topic or theoretical material (see: Abas; Gadelshina, Cornwell & Spoors or Heruti). Moreover, teaching visual literacy would allow students to critically read and understand visuals and multimodal texts (as shown by Chai; Gadelshina, Cornwell & Spoors; Loerts & Belcher; McLeod or Statton Thompson). The elements of critical reading, critical thinking, and critical analysis are stressed in nearly all papers. This tendency indicates overall importance of critical thinking in higher education and the role of visual literacy in developing these skills.

Importantly, nearly all the activities proposed by the contributors are related to the writing assignments. This, once again, demonstrates that university teaching is based on the traditional text-based tasks. Innovativeness, in many of the papers, denotes art-based activities applied in the frames of otherwise traditional teaching, like for example in literacy classes (see: Abas; Loerts & Belcher or Min), business (see: Gadelshina, Cornwell & Spoors), or sociology (see: Chai or Costa). Secondly, the change towards visual-based teaching is slow, mainly because it is new, and thus challenging, for both students and universities (see: Loerts and Belcher). Therefore, classroom activities that can incorporate visual literacy tasks should be advocated more in the future, since there are so many opportunities for their improvement.

Future challenges of visual literacy education

Implementation of the new practices in the twenty-first-century literacy education is demanding. It should be introduced in a systematic way rather than via ad hoc activities. It requires revolutionary thinking, assessing, grading and testing. The new (visual) literacy education is ephemeral, momentary, multitasking, simultaneous, random, non-structured; it happens digitally, switching between devices and (learning) platforms, but it also happens in physical contexts, such as classrooms. We are returning to the holistic view on knowledge and knowing, and thus, on teaching and learning. This is why visual education is so helpful — teachers may show and discuss what they are not able to explain orally or what the students may not be able to comprehend from textual sources. Visually based teaching empowers learners by opening new possibilities for sharing. However, high-quality visual education requires skilled and visually literate teachers as well. Thus, a call for visually immersed higher education is also addressed to the educators. Implementing this call means moving from our comfort zone and overcoming possible technological issues whilst being there to enjoy and to provide students with new transferable skills.

Particularly, as indicated by Gadelshina, Cornwell, and Spoors or Loerts and Belcher, more attention is needed for the teachers and their pedagogical skills to incorporate art-based teaching techniques. The teachers have to be able not only to execute multimodal tasks but also be sensitive to the raised concerns by the students about the quality of their visual assignments and drawing skills (see, for example, Gadelshina, Cornwell & Spoors or Loerts & Belcher). Additionally, they have to provide for constructive feedback, sharing and collaboration possibilities that are greatly beneficial for visual literacy development either through the digital means or traditional dialogue (as pointed out by Abas; Heruti or Loerts & Belcher).

The future of visual literacy and visual education of the millennial or post-millennial learners should be oriented toward the question How? Our aim with this special issue was to provide possible answers to this question by introducing practices of visual literacy education across disciplines. Visual literacy scholars are still in the process of looking for a consensus on visual literacy theory and definition of this inherently and internally diverse field. From the point of view of the educational practice, there is no time to wait for this to happen, especially in higher education that is already suffering from the primary textual teaching modes.

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