Visual Literacy and Message Design

By Rune Pettersson

Discussions about the use of images and pictures have a long history. Ancient philosophers used images for visual communication. Teun Velders concluded that "the history of visual communication goes back to the cave paintings 30,000 years ago, the description of it only 2,500. ...visual literacy is 2,500 years old (as a skill) and 30 years young (as a term)" (1999, p. 10).

Definitions of Visual Literacy

In 1976 Lida Cochran asked delegates at a media leadership conference to define the term "visual literacy." The 62 definitions indicated that 52 different phrases were used to define the adjective "visual" and that three major meanings evolved for the word "literacy"—as a group of competencies, as a process or method of teaching, and as a movement. All the delegates agreed that visual literacy referred to three major and diverse categories: human abilities, teaching strategies, and the promotion of ideas.

It is difficult to describe verbally a concept that is primarily nonverbal. Many definitions or explanations of visual literacy, visualization, and understanding of pictures have been considered. Definitions vary from very narrow to very broad explanations of greater or lesser complexity. Personally, I agree with Robert Heinich et al. (1982): "Visual literacy is the learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages. Thus interpretation and creation in visual literacy can be said to parallel reading and writing in print literacy."

There has been, and there still is, considerable disagreement among researchers and practitioners concerning a definition of visual literacy. So far, there is no consensus (Pettersson, 2002a).

Visual Literacy is Interdisciplinary

Many researchers from different disciplines have explained their views and interpretations and written about visual literacy from their various perspectives. Visual literacy may be applied in almost all areas such as advertising, anatomy, art, biology, business presentations, communication, education, engineering, etc. (Pettersson, 2002a).

Despite all our combined efforts during the past 40 years, visual literacy has not been able to attract enough interest from society and enough interest from those responsible for school curricula around the world. A number of researchers have practically rejected the whole concept of visual literacy. An important reason for this may be a general lack of focus. In my view, we need to consider combined verbal and visual messages, not only text and not only visuals, when we study communication and communication-related issues. This is where message design and its different sub-areas may play an important role for visual literacists.

Message Design

Design science deals with the organizational—the rational and a wholly systematic approach to design—to bring forward scientific knowledge of artifacts and design as a scientific activity in itself. Critics of design science claim that design is nothing in itself. It is just a part of other sciences. However, in my view it is possible to see design science as a large field of academic research, education, and training. There are common problem areas regardless of what we design. Thus, it may be helpful to use a common terminology.

In a classification of *design terminology*, the top level may be named "Families." The next level may

be called "Genera" (or disciplines, or groups). The third level is "Species" (or subject matters). Each subject matter consists of a number of courses.

I see six design families. In five of these, the classification depends on the purpose of the design. We can design artifacts, different messages, performances, systems and processes, and our own environments. These design families are called artifact design, message design, performance design, systems design or systems development, and environment design. All are held together with design philosophy, the sixth design family.

The Message Design Family

A group of design disciplines deal with the design of messages. Here the main components are words, visuals, and forms. These components may be used in many different ways to produce, transmit, and interpret messages of various kinds in different communication situations. Message design, MD, is an interdisciplinary field of knowledge. It encompasses influences and facts from more than

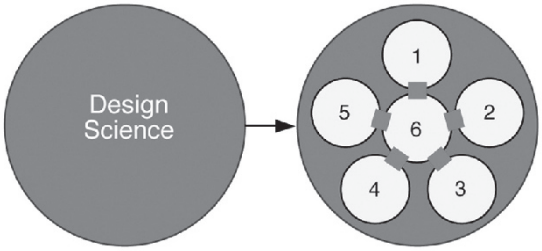

Figure 1: The area design science (left) includes six design families (right): 1) artifact design, 2) message design, 3) performance design, 4) systems design, 5) environment design, and 6) design philosophy.

fifty established academic disciplines, subject matters, and areas of research. These areas may be divided into six groups with "base disciplines:" language disciplines, art and aesthetic disciplines, information disciplines, communication disciplines, behavioral and cognitive disciplines, business and law, and media production technology disciplines.

This "message design model" is a theoretical model showing that different knowledge areas influence and contribute to message design. Please note that the ovals in the illustration representing the various groups of disciplines are not meant to be sharp and distinct. The borders between the groups are rather blurred, unclear, and indistinct. The model is not intended to show any exact relationships among the "base disciplines." Depending on the different objectives of the messages we can see different "message design genera" or "message design disciplines." These groups are graphic design, information design, instruction design, mass design, and persuasion design.

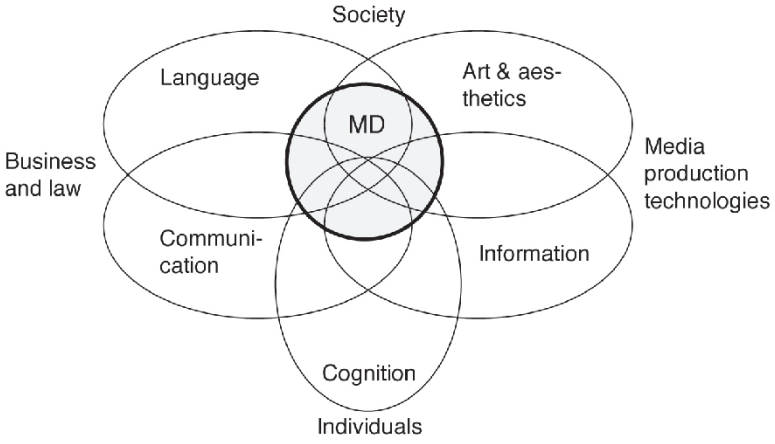

Figure 2: Message design (MD) is interdisciplinary and encompasses influences and facts from more than fifty established academic areas of research.

All MD disciplines have a theoretical as well as a practical component. Message designers need to have theoretical knowledge as well as practical skills. In order to perform sound reflections and make a qualified reflection regarding theory and practice, we need concepts both to structure our thoughts and to describe them verbally.

The Information Design Genus

Information design, ID, has its origin and roots in graphic design; in education and teaching; and in architecture and engineering, or rath-

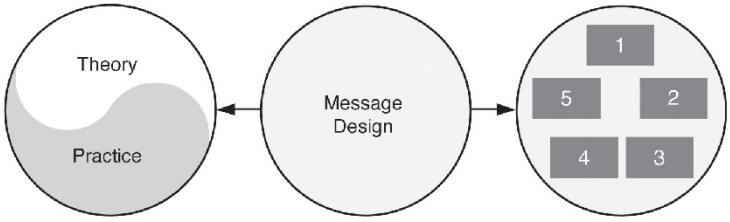

Figure 3: The message design family (middle) includes five design genera (right): 1) graphic design, 2) information design, 3) instruction design, 4) mass design, and 5) persuasion design (5). All have got a theoretical as well as a practical component (left).

er construction and production. In these broad areas, people have recognized the need for clear, distinct, and trustworthy presentation and interpretation of verbal as well as visual messages.

Information design can be hard to define, and it often goes by other names. I have described information design in the following way):

> In order to satisfy the information needs of the intended receivers information design comprises analysis, planning, presentation, and understanding of a message–its content, language and form. Regardless of the selected medium, a well-designed information material, with its message, will satisfy aesthetic, economic,

ergonomic, as well as subject matter requirements (Pettersson, 2002b).

At present, the genus information design includes three subject matters. They are named communication design, information design, and presentation design. In the future it is quite possible that some universities will introduce similar subject matters and use other names.

The Future

Visual literacy and message design are very broad and thus very complex areas of knowledge. Many individuals with different kinds of backgrounds have shown a keen interest in visual literacy. This is also true for message design. Good applications of visual literacy and of message design are needed in many situations, and in many academic disciplines.

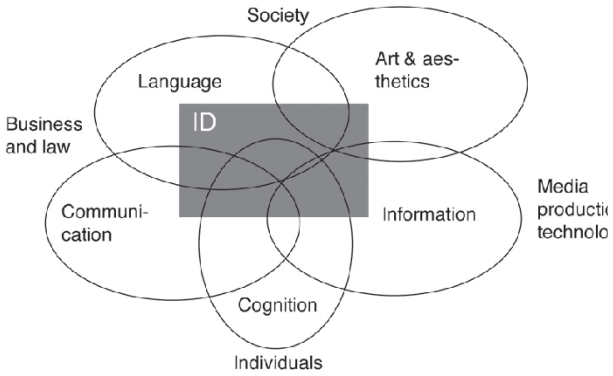

Figure 4: This is a model of the genus information design (ID). Please note that the ovals representing the various groups of disciplines are not meant to be sharp and distinct.

Academic disciplines are not at all cast in steel. They evolve and new areas of knowledge are developing. An expansive academic discipline may develop in many directions. Such expansions are usually based and well grounded in research. Sub-areas may get the status of new disciplines. At the same time some academic disciplines may overlap a bit with other academic disciplines.

Neither visual literacy nor message design has been "divided away" from another discipline. A discipline like information design has been deliberately "put together" with elements from several different areas of knowledge (Pettersson, 2002b). This happened at the same time in different parts of the world, and information design has its origin and its roots in different areas. However, today it is also a "receiving" academic discipline.

From a process perspective, new applications develop in concert with already established disciplines. Experience, knowledge, and skills from visual literacy and message design can be "injected" into a number of disciplines as a kind of "catalyst" for development of new applications where subject matter knowledge in specific areas needs to be communicated to different audiences. Many trees cannot grow without the help of small fungi. Trees and fungi live in symbiosis. This may be the main future for visual literacy and for message design in all those areas where communication knowledge is needed.

One example is development of information sets related to the climate crisis. However, at the same time someone needs to work in the two "centers" with questions that are relevant for all applications and symbiotic relationships.

It can be concluded that visual literacy and the use of images is important in message design as well as in a large number of other areas. It can also be concluded that message design is important in visual literacy. The concepts visual literacy and message design partly overlap one another. In many situations it is, however, not enough to study visuals only. We need to consider and study combined messages, not only text and not only visuals, when we study communication and communication situations.

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