RECEPTION OF 'VISUAL LITERACY COMPETENCY STANDARDS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION' (ERIC, 2011) IN THE POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: *In the paper the author describes the cultural and technological context of the visual literacy, coming from the specifics of the developing image culture and shaping of the information society. It shows the results of the pilot research on the Polish students in the scope of specific visual competences. The reference material for the research tasks prepared for'"The legitimacy of visual literacy in the process of education" project was the visual literacy set (Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, Chicago 2011) developed in academic and educational environments in the USA (The Association of College and Research Libraries, ACRL).*

Keywords: information literacy, visual literacy, visual culture, information culture, intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary intercultural communication is an interdisciplinary and multifaceted symbolical, social and ideological discussion that takes place according to specific behaviors, norms and customs. It takes place by the creations of a specific society, including art, technology, ideology and education which collectively create an arrangement between the sender and the receiver, based on mutual understanding and acceptance or their denial. We discover the world not only with words and texts but also with images embedded in real life. The visual area makes for a specific plateau of communication in which we can distinguish the following zones: iconic and symbolic, which are the foundation for the language layer of interpretation. It operates with its own language of images and visual representations with references to the extensive rich knowledge conditioned by education, socialization and upbringing (Pulak, Wieczorek-Tomaszewska 2012).

The omnipresent communication in the modern world is entering various areas of life. We speak through images in politics, education and in the mass and elite culture. Irrespective of the finesse conceptions of the designers of the visual campaigns and architects of information, visual images speak to us directly. The acceptance of the visual form of communication, as a method supplementing the message or transforming into a form of message, has a long lasting cultural tradition and sets our senses to value the visual experiences (Dylak 2012, Pater-Ejgierd 2010). The scope and the quality of the messages using images determines their reception and condition the acceptance or rejection of the visual form of communication. They also specify the need for participating in such an interaction.

Symbolic goods, which are within the reach of the communication influences, are the result of the axiological and normative behavior of specific communities. They are subject to quality assessment in the context of the development of the civilization: *communication is cultural through its scope and polite through its quality* (Mikułowski Pomorski 2012).

1. IMAGE IN CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The existing symbolic world in cultural communication is an extensive area that makes communication possible. The means of communication may be physical goods interpreted in the context of meeting higher needs, including works of art, that provide the speaker with a plethora of meanings, definitions, interpretations, messages through content, form and medium. Coding and decoding information is no longer an issue. So difficult in regular interpersonal communication, it does not differentiate the common world of symbols and meanings. Due to visual forms in paintings, sculptures, architecture, visual arts, conceptual arts, performance arts and other messages that operate with image – identity, stereotypes, prejudices, otherness - are becoming the source of knowledge, unraveling new meanings and interpretations. Enriching culture through development, creating new schemes for knowledge.

1.1. Efficiency of communication

The condition for *sine qua non* of communication efficiency is the mutual understanding of the participants in the act of communication. Cultural interaction is based on a code that is common for both the sender and the receiver. It takes place within a community which has a history of cultural development. In the scope of mutual experiences specific interpretations of events and experiences emerge which depend on internal factors which make up the communication plateau. They specify a life model for the community which was shaped by the processes of acquiring knowledge and bringing experiences together. It emotionally tinged due to the involvement of the participants and references to a common past.

The visual message plays a twofold role in communication: subject as the message and the physical as a means of communication. An image can be utilized for a conversation on different quality levels, bringing up various artifacts, adjusting to a specific situation and standing for the necessity to be understood. It depends on the audience and on their intellectual potential and achievable levels of abstraction.

1.2. Intercultural communication

Efficient communication within the boundaries of a country does not meet any cognitive barriers, however, the phenomenon of generating differences is quite common in the multi-nation and multi-cultural aspect. It differentiates upbringing and cultural education, socialization, ideology, history, system of norms and values. In such a situation the basis for searching for common plateaus of communication is the cultural heritage. The identity foundation of the global community is based on elements in different contexts as a whole but uniform and mutually accepted with respect to systems of values. They should facilitate understanding, tolerance and acceptance which will allow for freedom of movement in areas of different lifestyles in the future. There is an agreement between cultures which aims at understanding others and being understood. Intercultural communication is a value that allows for acquiring information on other worlds, building new schemes of knowledge by meeting people and understanding their behavior, and it allows for creating new communication values in various forms and scopes.

Intercultural communication in the modern world is interactive which mean that it activates all senses in order to establish communication. It engages the participants and draws from various media - within those media there is a flow of symbolic goods, beliefs, customs, conventions, values, norms and actions (Mikułowski Pomorski 2012). Intercultural communication is an interdisciplinary knowledge, it can be studied within different branches of education. J. Mikułowski-Pomorski lists the following areas that analyze modes of communication: cultural anthropology, psychology, social psychology, sociology, linguistics and semiotics, rhetoric and communication knowledge (Mikułowski Pomorski 2012). According to Edward T. Hall, culture is *the content of inter-human communication* (Hall 2001), where the message is a set of situational methods of thinking and behavior models created by humans. G. Hofstede adds values and attitudes to this mental program or community which program the cultural message and are aimed at dominating others (manipulation), co-existence (interaction) or expressing oneself (expression) (Hofstede 2007).

Visual communication facilitates understanding other traditions and values within a uniform community. Visual information generates images which, interpreted upon entering the world of icons, become a cognitive process.

2. VISUAL LITERACY

The transformation of the 21st century, which is becoming more visual rather than text based, is caused by the ubiquity of images and visual media that interfere in the life of a human being. New technologies allow to use visual content freely as well as create new forms of messages by everyone. Imagination is not only a supplement of information but it can be used in a creative way at the initial stage of formulating content. It can bolster interpretation skills where people will be prepared beforehand to use and create visual content critically. Visual competences allow for full participation in culture and visually focused community.

The transformation of a modern society and a clear domination of the visual under the influence of images and visual media make a significant impact on shaping the life of a human being. The ubiquity of visual information used in intercultural communication (education and science, social life, culture and arts, advertising, architecture) does not always go well with the quality of visual interpretations of cultural texts, and usually, many a time, wrongly decoded handicaps cognitive processes. Cultural and contextual references of visual information require knowledge coming from the cultural capital acquired through generations, including visual knowledge understood as modes of visually transmitted knowledge embedded in the education system (Schnettler 2011). It allows for expanding interpretation skills of visual data, their critical and creative use as well as acquiring new ones, simultaneously adjusting to the legal and ethical standards of their use.

2.1. Research Visual Literacy

Extensive studies conducted by the author of the project "Legitimization of visual literacy in the learning process" consist of a multicultural and technological context, evolving from the specifics of the evolutionary culture of the image. This program encourages the information technology skills to be used in practical ways in the learning process. The assumption of the research project implemented in academic bodies is to release the creativity and the cognitive potential of the young generation in the scope of the visually transmitted information (conception, searching and acquisition, interpretation, assessment, usage, designing and sharing). There will be an analysis of the effectiveness of learning in visual literacy based on the results from the seven cognitive areas. The study on visual skills tests objects as well as social standards and activities in the context of interpreting culture, in connection with evaluating the effectiveness with regard to Information Technology. Having visual competences, humans should also be critical consumers of visual media as well as competent participants of the culture in visual knowledge. In the interdisciplinary environment of the academic community such a person should be capable of:

1. Defining one’s informational needs, including types of necessary visual materials.

2. Effective and efficient searching of images and visual media in the available resources.

3. Interpreting and analyzing the meaning of images and visual media in the cultural, social and historical context.

4. Evaluating of images and verifying their sources.

5. Using image forms in order to effectively visualize terms, phenomena and processes.

6. Designing and creating one's own visual messages.

7. Having the knowledge of ethical, legal, social and economic issues related to the process of creating and using images and visual mass media, including the familiarity of the legal systems defining the scope of copyrights (*Visual literacy*, 2011).

Working with visual information should be based on searching skills, usage, sharing and creating visual materials and as well as on the ethical and legal awareness of sharing and distributing visual content. It is one of the elements of the information competences skill set of the contemporary society which combines information skills, interpretation, culture and visual communication with technological capabilities in terms of using digital media.

In the context of global learning *Standards* is a positive example of actions meant to unify the strategic competence and didactic priorities that create new possibilities for using and evaluating visual methods of work and their professional development. Categorization of visual competences is marked by the behavior of the contemporary information society which information needs may be met through new emerging visual interpretations of knowledge (ex. http://scimpas.org). Abstract thinking elicited by images, similarly as traditional linear memorizing, responsible for expanding knowledge and intellectual development, refers to the intercultural intellectual resources. In light of the endless amounts of contemporary information, their acquisition depends on the specific mode of recording information which facilitates cognitive processes of structuring, systematizing, symbolizing, generalizing, abstracting, etc. The image as a synthetic set of various contents - data, relationships, phenomena, hypotheses, conclusions, ideas - meets the cognitive needs even of the most sophisticated academic environments and it currently functions as an independent body of knowledge susceptible to analysis and research according to specific disciplinary dogmas. In countries with an advanced information potential the visual methods are commonly used in learning for theorizing, making a point or proving hypotheses (Wieczorek-Tomaszewska 2014).

The analyzed standards and competences within visual literacy may be a step forward for the Polish education system at the academic level in order to spread the visual methods within the higher education system, reaching out to the needs of the modern multicultural information society.

3. VISUAL COMPETENCES IN LIGHT OF OWN RESEARCH.

3.1. Methodology

The selected research methods were determined by the goal of the project, save the unilateral analysis of the visual literacy phenomenon (statistically in the aspect of the representativeness of the results as well as acknowledging the quality). The project included the quantity approach as well as the quality approach. In order to organize the obtained information the SWOT analytical tools were used, which are a starting point for further explications. The triangular method used in the project, meant for the supplementary usage of diverse techniques (two types of reconnaissance, questionnaires, data analyses) and sources of data (Polish and American students) makes for obtaining a depiction of the phenomenon from different perspectives and allows for better explaining the visual skill issue of the studied group as well as for determining the factors which influence the increase in the education activity in that field.

There is an analysis planned on the effectiveness of learning in the field of *visual literacy* based on the results from the seven cognitive areas. The author's goal for the participants of the research project was to play the role of critical consumers of visual media as well as competent participants of the visual knowledge culture.

The assumed classification in the project, based on *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (*Visual*…, 2011) is aimed at analyzing the actions of the participants in an interdisciplinary environment of information of the higher education system in the context of defined competences (table 1.)

Table 1.

Seven groups of visual competences Tasks and indicators

Competence tasks within visual literacy	Indicators
S-I. Define your needs in terms of image	Areas of exploration
	Sources
	Criteria
	Generating ideas
	Types and formats
S-II. Find images	Research programs
	Identification
	Selection
	Discoveries
	Organization
S-III. Interpret and analyze images	Observation
	Textual data
	Contexts
	Understanding the meaning

S-IV. Assess image usefulness	Source credibility
	Effectiveness
	Aesthetics
	Transformation accuracy
S-V. Effectively use images	Goal of the research project
	Using technology
	Impact on the project
	Communication
	Visual thinking (logic)
S-VI. Create new images	Graphical representations
	Experimenting
	Creative reusing of visual motifs
	Visual conceptions
	Choosing the best project
S-VII. Ethically quote images and videos	Intellectual property
	Copyrights
	Censorship
	Privacy
	Documentation

Source: Own work based on 'Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education', 2011

Visual skills are considered as a part and an extension of the information competences of the contemporary multicultural society which allow for freedom of movement in the intricacies of the information and communication systems. Within the information culture they bring together *information literacy*, interpretation and visual communication with technological skills in the scope of using digital media (Batorowska 2013). Images make for individual objects of knowledge, that retain their structure and logic (infographics, simulations, schemes, multimedia messages) and are susceptible for interpretation and academic analysis. They are aesthetic conceptual objects, designed to take the human perception to different levels of analysis. In environments based on standard textual methods of obtaining knowledge they require specific cognitive skills which facilitate modeling of conscious and abstract thought processes (Wieczorek-Tomaszewska 2012). As a tool for the information architecture they introduce structural designing of the information space meant for organizing information.

3.2. Report of the pilot research program of the visual literacy in the academic environment

The presented report of the pilot research program is an introduction to the project implemented under the author's research: 'Legitimization of visual literacy in the Polish academic environment' (*VLS No. A*). The project consists of groups of

students selected from academic circles all over the country, based on the quota sampling. On the basis of the presented stage of the research project which included five focus groups in five academic centers (Pedagogical University in Cracow, University of Science and Technology in Cracow, University of Silesia, Warsaw Polytechnics and The University of Gdansk), the main focus was on the analysis of understanding the definition of the visual information in the context of the Lengler and Eppler's typology (Lenger, Eppler 2014) and on the diagnostic measurements of the scope and type of *visual literacy* in the context of *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* [*Visual*…, 2011].

The first stage of the research (diagnostic tools of *Visual Literacy Standards No. A*) consisted of study activities aimed at making an initial diagnosis of the explored phenomenon by defining the appearance of the focus group, analyzed with respect to the knowledge of the studied skills (fig. 1).

The research results show that respondents do not have difficulties in determining the goal, type and scope of conducted visual activities (*1.*). They can properly define the need for using images in specific situations and plan the effectiveness of their visual activities in relation to the set learning goals (98%). A similar proficiency is declared with respect to workshop and logistics related skills (*2.*) of searching, acquiring and sharing visual materials on the web. The two above skills do not pose any problems whatsoever for the respondents because their source is in the natural activity coming from the need to "exist" on the web, using its resources and communicating with people. Less prepared were the respondents with respect to other analyzed *visual literacy* standards, connected with the quality approach to the visual information, i.e. (*4.*) evaluating the image and its source and (*5.*) choosing the visualization method for efficient visualization of data, relationships and ideas - these are the skills which were declared by 60% of the respondents. Even less of the respondents (58%) declared that they accurately interpret and analyze the meaning of images (visual activities) with an appropriate reference to cultural, social and historical texts (*3.*). The creative approach in terms of visualization (*6.*) connected with the ability to create visual messages would be used by only 40% of the respondents. The rest of the respondents did not have the chance to try out their visual information skills, be it using traditional or digital methods, during their institutional education process. Yet a worse score was obtained with respect to the standard which main focus is the ability to properly function in the Internet reality (*7.*), connected axiologically to the set of norms and rules in the modern information society. As much as 75% of the respondents do not posses the sufficient knowledge on ethical, legal and economic topics connected with the process of creating and using images, and visual means of mass media.

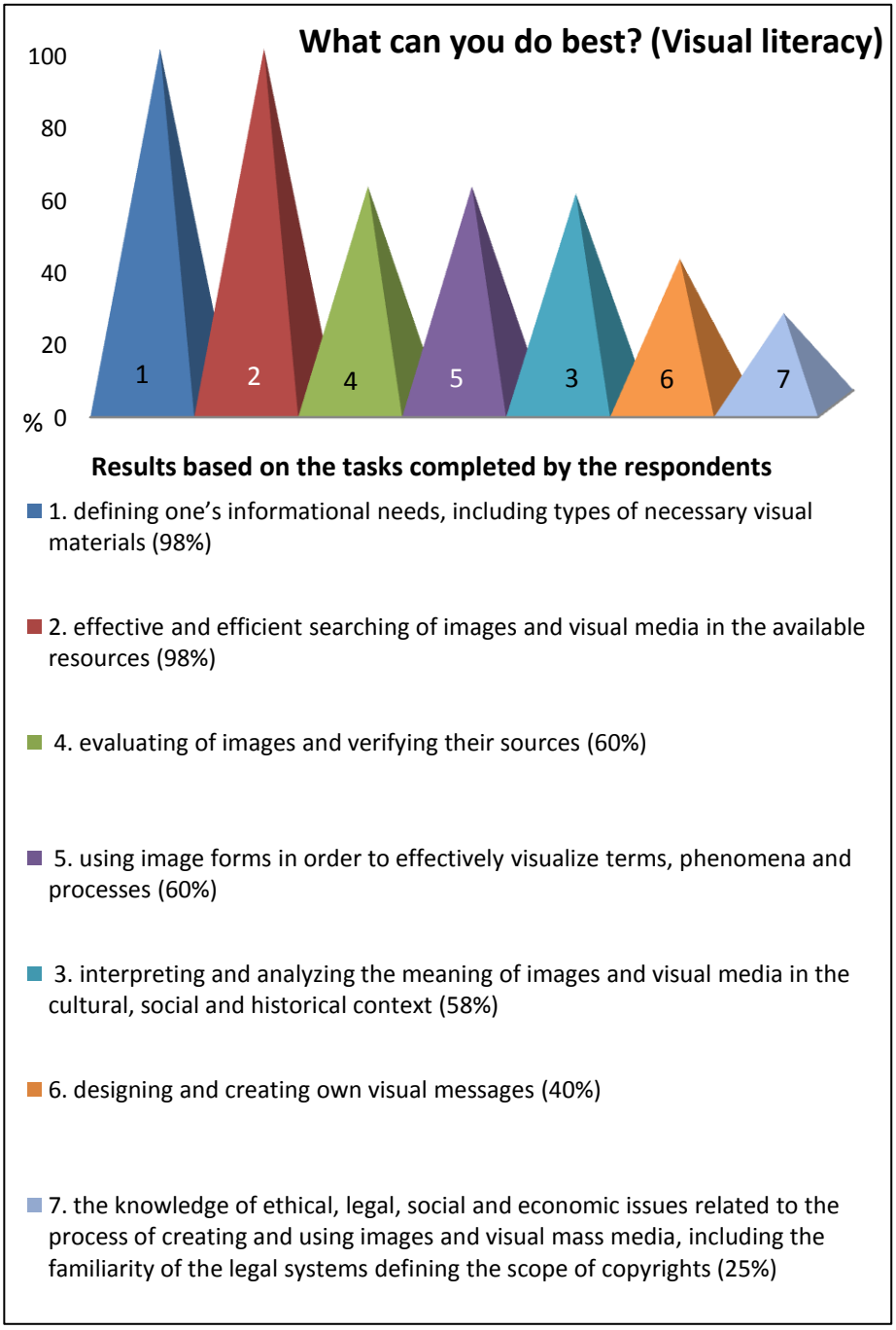

Figure 1. Diagnostic study on *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Initial form). Visual competency levels (Visual Literacy Standards No. A)

CONCLUSION

The appearance of the focus group outlined in the study shows individuals treating their visual activities as highly superficial. The recorded activities show a significant number of declarative behaviors rather than competent activities based on solid knowledge aimed at creating an efficient information visual message. Similarly, with respect to creativity, the research shows the activity of the respondents on a mediocre level. One of the most positive features registered in this section of the research is the desire to master and supplement the knowledge on the issues raised by the focal group which conducted a focused reconnaissance of the issues. The need for supplementing this particular area of knowledge brings certain suggestions in relation to strengthening the standards of preparing young people at initial stages of learning.

The fact that the respondents know so little about the rules of acquiring and sharing visual materials, especially copyrighted materials, indicates an immediate need for education. All the more that the activity of the Internet users in relation to "speaking with images" corresponds to lowering the education standards of the society. If we do not take educational steps towards developing visual competences, we may be faced with distorting the cultural message, recreated by generation after generation, filled with new values and meanings, with respect to the evolutionary multicultural society.

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