

Hyper Visual Culture: Implications for Open Distance Learning at Teacher Education Level

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Abstract

Many printed and electronic texts to date abound with visual information purportedly integrated to enrich the learning experience of the readers. The world today is inundated with images. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, visual learning is becoming prominent in every learning situation and inevitably in the print-based open distance learning model (ODL) in teacher education. In this paper I argue that there is no proportionate growth between the use of visual language and visual semiotics competences for open distance learning at teacher education level in Zimbabwe. This paper is based on empirical findings from a gender critical visual narrative study conducted in Zimbabwe with 20 teacher education students. Prompts in conjunction with focus group discussions were used to solicit participants to exhibit how gender perspectives were interpreted through the encoding and decoding of visual displays. The results showed that the images actually exhibited gendered data, particularly critical social themes such as gender violence, fights for equal rights and gender oppression reversals in addition to the predictable patriarchal, masculine, hegemonic themes identified. The study therefore concluded that exposing the student teachers to visual pedagogy during ODL without the pre-requisite visual interpretation skill is disastrous, ineffective and time wasting. Learning becomes divorced from the world in which the learner lives. The paper therefore puts forward some guidelines for the adoption of visual pedagogy and recommendations to expose the teacher education students to the visual grammar and semiotic skills necessary for visual analysis.

Keywords: gender; semiotics; visual inquiry; visual interpretation



Introduction

Many classrooms, lecture halls, media and texts (printed or electronic) abound with varied visual information purportedly integrated to enrich the learning experience of the learner. Visual images have become a salient part of our daily lives. The world today is inundated with images in a manner that is unprecedented in the history of education, and this includes open distance learning (ODL). Multifarious visual content is available in abundance to ODL learners whether print-based, televisual, multimedia-based, and/or web-based (Burns 2011). Kress (2010) suggests that pictures convey information more efficiently and effectively than words do. It's much easier and involves individuals more to learn how machines work by looking at pictures, rather than by hearing someone describe them, as is the case for the open distance learner. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, visual learning is becoming prominent as an important learner-centred approach in every learning situation and inevitably in ODL teacher education, yet it is not being effectively exploited. In this paper, gleaned from (mis)interpretations of gendered visual content from encoded and decoded images, I argue that visual pedagogy in art education or any other subject at teacher education level strongly depends on the ability and level of preparedness of the learner artist/reader to effectively decipher visual content using visual semiotics competences. The study is based on the level of competences demonstrated through prompted interpretations of gendered visual content. In this paper, I begin by alluding to the hyper visual culture and the necessity of visual interpretation skills in visual learning before discussing the critical narrative methodology adopted for collecting data. The recommendations are based on the shortcomings identified from the findings to leverage maximum benefits for the print-based ODL teacher education model.

Conceptual Background

Berger (2008) suggests that seeing comes before words as a child is able to see and recognise things before she can speak a word, therefore visual communication seems to be increasingly becoming more important and common than textual communication. In this postmodern age images have gradually gained supremacy everywhere to communicate messages in place of words and texts (Kress 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). This is what Rose (2010) has termed the visual turn, vis-a-vis the linguistic turn. Spencer (in Rose 2014, 26) refers to the proliferation of the use of visuals in everyday life as a “contemporary mass visual culture.” Indeed, there is general consensus that there is “hyper visibility” in contemporary everyday life (Evans and Hall 1999; Mirzoeff 2009; Smith 2008; Sturken and Cartwright 2009 in Rose 2014). In 1993 Martin Jays (in Rose 2010) used the term “ocularcentrism” to refer to the apparent dominance and dependence on visual imagery in contemporary life. Most communication in open and distance learning is now mediated through images more frequently than before (Khvilon et al. 2002).

Kress (2010) concurs and remarks that teaching and learning are now mediated through images more often than before. Book illustrations, picture storybooks, charts, learning aids, slide shows, computers, educational magazines and educational DVDs have also adopted

images as a means to communicate ahead of text. Edgar Dale, a cognitive theorist, suggested as early as 1946 that learners retain more than 50 per cent of information that they acquire through visuals instruction, although this remains lower than retention of information that is gained through concrete first-hand experience. Many scholars have written in support that visual instruction is, nonetheless, more effective than the traditional verbal lecture methods which exploit hearing ability (Gholami and Bagheri 2013). These theories follow Dale's (1946) assertion that learners retain less than 10 per cent of what they learn through hearing. Thus, visual inquiry or visual instructional methods are gaining more relevance and need to be more frequently applied in print-based, televisual, multi-media and web-based learning material (Khvilon et al. 2002).

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) reiterate that this modern world is becoming increasingly more dependent upon the use of visual images to communicate, so helping students become visually literate must be a priority. Clandinin and Rosiek note that “[i]t's no longer enough to read and write.” They further suggest that students must learn to process both words and pictures. They (students) must be able to move gracefully and fluently between text and images. However, reading and interpreting visuals require a different kind of skill and resources to those required for reading a written text. Reading visuals requires particular visual interpretation skills (Kress 2003; 2010; Serafini 2012).

Visual images have “aboutness” and demand specific visual interpretation skills to be understood better and fully. This notion suggests that any person who reads an image from the first sight should know that it represents something. It is a sign, not for its own sake, but because it communicates something.¹ Visuals are similes and metaphors encoded with messages, which are decoded by the viewer in order to be understood. Visual images, like words, are therefore signs that require a more consciously acquired semiotic analysis in order for one to be able to interpret their meanings (Chandler 2002; Kress 2003).

Kress (2010) argues that interpretations are persuasive arguments which are supported by observable evidence in the image. Furthermore, to achieve an effective interpretation in visual inquiry pedagogy, learners need to observe the elements and evidence in the visual and relate them to the argument. In a study with a business class which was assigned to collect images that show success, Parsa (2004) reports that the students in this visual

1 There are two major theories about the way in which signs acquire the ability to transfer information; both theories understand the defining property of the sign as a relation between a number of elements. In the tradition of semiotics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure the sign relation is dyadic, consisting only of the form of the sign (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified). Saussure saw this relation as being essentially arbitrary—motivated only by social convention. Saussure's theory has been particularly influential in the study of linguistic signs, but eventually related to visual signs too (Chandler 2002). The other major semiotic theory, developed by C. S. Peirce, defines the sign as a triadic relation—as “something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity.” This means that a sign is a relation between a sign vehicle (the specific physical form of the sign), a sign object (the aspect of the world about which the sign carries meaning) and an interpretant (the meaning of the sign as understood by an interpreter).

learning inquiry managed to pinpoint markers of success within the photographs and images collected. It is often argued that all interpretations are correct as long as one argues for a particular interpretation. This notion is based on the premise that all arguments should hold in light of evidence, therefore there is no right or wrong interpretation if it is supported with evidence from the visual. Barret (2012) reiterates that some interpretations are better than others on the basis that the better ones are better argued, better grounded with evidence and therefore more reasonable. However, Barret (2012) and Kress (2010) concur that making a good argument or interpretation also depends on the learners' history, knowledge, beliefs and biases. In addition, Kristeva (1980) argues that intertextuality also aids interpretation. That is, knowledge about other images is critical in understanding contemporary images that are based on citation, bricolage and appropriation (Chandler 2002). This awareness prepares the mind to look more consciously and critically for cues and evidence from within and without the image to learn fully from imagery. Thus, in this hyper visual culture, images are better understood through other images. It is inevitable therefore to rely on the background knowledge, culture and social ideologies of the learners which they bring forth to interpret visual images in visual learning, particularly in the case of matured teacher education students.

Visual inquiry is a form of inquiry-based learning pedagogy that is importantly child-centered. More specifically, Parsa (2004) describes it as a cluster of approaches to learning based on a process of self-directed inquiry. This makes it more prudent in ODL. The notion of visual inquiry includes affective, transcendent and sensory dimensions of experience in the learning from visual images (Reeves and Hedberg 2003). Rose (2014) suggests that visual learning is a self-directed problem-based inquiry pedagogy suitable for teacher education. Following the strengths posed by the print-based model in reading culture, including images exhibits concrete visual evidence that relates to experiences.

Several educators and researchers have used visual inquiry pedagogy successfully in different subject areas. For instance, Page et al. (2011) have adopted visual inquiry pedagogy in a business class to teach the concept of "success." McCarthy (2013) has explored students' understanding of "home" in geography lectures and also in information technology courses. Learners are reported to have mastered and interrogated the concepts under study successfully with vigour and precision, exploiting the salient potential of visual literacy and visual interpretation. Ironically, this has not been fully exploited in teacher education, particularly in ODL. Visual learning has been a commonly used method for conveying learning material in the classroom since the 1960s, because it is child-centred, it is an open inquiry method, it helps to summarise information and connects explanation to visual evidence (Murray (2009). This paper is therefore guided by the following pertinent questions: To what extent can print-based ODL teacher education art students in Zimbabwe decipher and explore the visual content of contemporary visual displays with reference to gender issues? Do the interpretations thereof exhume fully the critical awareness of gender practices in Zimbabwe and bring to awareness that contemporary images abound with decipherable information relevant for critical learning? Through exploring these questions,

this paper demonstrates that strategies to extend competencies in visual interpretation to the print-based ODL model at teacher education level are vital.

Objectives

It is against this background that the researcher intends, first, to demonstrate and highlight the abundance of information available from visual images and the importance of specific visual interpretation strategies that can effectively be used in visual inquiry pedagogy in print-based ODL at teacher education level. Second, the paper intends as its ultimate goal to present adaptive visual interpretation guidelines that can be used to unlock and maximise the benefits of visual inquiry pedagogy in print-based ODL at teacher education level—for visual images are worth a thousand words.

Research Methodology

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who are art students undertaking teacher education undergraduate degrees in Zimbabwe and have been partly exposed to visual interpretation in their courses. A fair representation selected from this case study, eight females and 12 males, constituted the sample population. Teacher education students are adequately matured in chronological age to have developed distinct gender identities, which was a necessary condition for this study. Dziwa (2016) notes that individuals bring certain social cultural backgrounds to visual interpretation, so gender identities were key in this study to demonstrate how gendered visual content is deciphered. Therefore, the selection of participants with specific knowledge of the phenomena under investigation was found suitable for the study sample used (Berg 2001; Patton 2002; Textor 2008).

The critical interpretive paradigm was found suitable to uncover art student teachers' decisions and motivations for interpreting visual images from their gender orientations, which also allowed the researcher to reflect on and critically analyse the participants' gender constructions. The critical interpretivist paradigm was useful to stress the need to contextualise visual discourse in order to have a deeper, elaborated and emancipated understanding of the world from the subjective and independent experience of the participants in this qualitative case study.

Visual narrative inquiry has been adopted as the chief data gathering method. Visual narrative is an effective research tool which was chosen as it was seen as beneficial and suitable for the study of visual images. The other data-gathering technique that I used was focus group interviews. Focus group interviews explore attitudes, perceptions, feelings and ideas about a specific topic within a group setting (Denscombe 2010; Silverman 2006).

A prompt on gender issues was used to direct the research, which solicited participants to express their understanding of gender perspectives and practices prevailing in Zimbabwe through visual displays. The prompts were found to be effective for this qualitative critical interpretivist study, which probes participants' personal interpretations of and reactions to

their “gender culture.” The students had to perform the following encoding and decoding tasks as stimuli to access the extent to which they can decipher *gender culture* from visual content:

- create a visual artwork through painting portraying a gendered theme in a Zimbabwean context; and
- select images and or take photographs from existing artworks which informants interpret as reflecting gender polarity.

A pilot study, member checking, crystallisation and an audit trail have been employed to check the validity and reliability of the data. Instruments were tested in other settings prior to use with the sample population and the transcribed focus group interviews were validated by the participants themselves. Complementing data collection methods were employed to show credibility. Other experts were also given the script to audit and thus check the validity of the data.

Analysis Methodology

Critical visual discourse analysis (CVDA) was used to analyse 40 visual artefacts that the students had made and collected. These visual narratives reveal the discourse sources of gender power, dominance, inequality and bias and also how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific gendered social contexts. According to Fairclough (2001), critical discourse analysis has three levels of discourse context: macro, meso and micro, which were used for analysis in this study. Three levels of analysing images were taken into consideration: 1.) the composition of the image, with its content and design, 2.) the context of production and publication, including the horizon of historic events, and 3.) the mode of reception, with respect to communicative processes.

Employing these three steps in CVDA, the researcher was able to interrogate the representations through critically considering what these representations allow the participants to see, and simultaneously what they prevent them from seeing in respect of gender constructions and how these are reflected in visual images. This process thus satisfied the main objective of this study, which was to assess the extent to which images can be read and understood as having gendered connotations.

The data from the focus group discussions was qualitatively analysed to elicit the participants’ understanding of the content of the visual images. Focus group discussions on visual narratives were structured starting with description. If readers do not notice these particular elements, they may not be able to extract meaning from the visuals during the interpretive processes.

Findings and Discussion

Based on critical discourse analysis of transcribed focus group data and critical visual discourse analysis of visual displays, the interpretations revealed that visual images abound with content and meaning. Four prevailing gender frames were identified from the visual displays among the participants. These are gender hierarchy, gender labour division, gender attitudes dichotomy, and gender equality. Participants' gender discourses revealed that masculinity and femininity have a hierarchical relationship. Men are considered to be superior and dominate women in the hierarchy. It emerged clearly that participants consciously visually interpret woman's status as lower than that of a man physically, socially, religiously and politically. It emerged clearly from the visual narratives that evidence in the visual displays depicts a gender hierarchy that exists as men are usually depicted seated higher than women who tend to sit on lower seats or on the ground. Males are perceived as being above females through a top-down reading of visual images which starts with the male subjects who are on top.

Further analysis by the researcher, using critical visual discourse analysis, revealed that this gender hierarchy is translated into visual displays and correlates body size, weight, height and volume with gender status. It emerged that males tend to be visually represented as dominating and as a focal point in design through the use of colour, size and position; this is part and parcel of the underlying gender perceptions regarding males dominating females. Men make decisions and dictate to women how and what to do, and where a woman may be seated. A study by Goffman (1971) also confirms the hierarchical relationship between males and females in visual displays. However, the findings of this study deviate from what Goffman (1971) found: there is a ritualisation of subordination in advertisements that create unnatural poses where the female is constructed as subordinate and powerless. The gender construction displays of male domination and female subordination interpreted in this study represent the engraved, naturalised perceptions of gender polarisation.

The interpretations also further revealed that gender complementarities illuminate perceptions of gender inequality and hierarchy between males and females. For instance, where a dark colour is used for masculine clothes, a complementing bright colour is used for the feminine clothes to create complementary harmony in the colour scheme of the composition. Thus, stereotypical feminine traits which are enforced in gender dichotomies also have an enabling masculine stereotype. For instance, when a female is expected to be soft-spoken, the male tends to be loud and dominating in discussions; when she sits on the ground, he sits on a raised stool and when she is subservient, he is domineering. The findings indicate that femininity and masculinity are two opposite poles which complement each other. Asymmetrical visual balance and complementary colour schemes expressed in the visual displays have exploited this engraved gender relationship.

Men dominate women in decision-making, leadership, the provision of income, security and protection and therefore have a big and esteemed value in society beyond that of

women. As a result, women are expected to be submissive and docile. Participants demonstrated through discussion with ease how they have interpreted their gender as being in a hierarchical and asymmetrical relationship, but visual displays had more nuances reflecting the male domination and female subordination.

The participants interpreted that another frame of the gender displays portrayed males and females performing dichotomous and polarised labour roles and functions. The meanings encoded and decoded about the labour roles displayed in the visual narratives indicate that participants have interpreted gender roles as being stereotyped and distinct. Masculine roles displayed in the visuals include chopping firewood and are considered harder and tougher and are more highly regarded than those roles performed by females. Further analysis revealed that domestic duties such as cleaning the house, cooking and caring for a family are considered to be the domain of women. It emerged that even when the woman is formally employed, it does not exonerate her from seeing to her domestic duties. The study revealed that women who are not formally employed and stay at home feel that they are indebted to their husbands who provide them with everything they need. In addition to labour roles, the study revealed that dichotomous gender performances entail that men have peculiar functions as providers of income and security to the females and children. Thus, the displays produced reflected males providing security, food and protection to the females. On the other hand, displays also revealed that females have nurturing and mothering functions which are peculiar to them. Females' association with their siblings in visual displays portrayed this function.

The third gender frame to emerge from the interpretations was the gender attitude dichotomy frame. Participants showed that masculine and feminine emotional attitudes and affective reactions are represented differently. This frame revealed that reactions to the attention of onlookers, emotions and aesthetic taste are dichotomous and asymmetrical. The study revealed that females seek onlooker attention more than males through their direct gaze to the viewer and association with bright hues, such as stepping on red carpets. With reference to colour as an art element, gendered interpretations and preferences between males and females in the displays reflected polarised aesthetic attitudes. Further analysis indicated that females' association with cool colours in the displays correlates with feminine gender traits of passivity and weakness while the dark colours are related to masculine aggression and strength. The polarised gender attitudes displayed indicate that the masculine and feminine relationship is perceived as being hierarchical and asymmetrical. Thus, the study revealed that there is a critical consciousness of the dichotomy, particularly the inequalities attached to the gender poles which are expressible through gender displays.

The results showed that the images actually exhibited more ideological gender perceptions, particularly critical social themes such as fights for equal rights and gender oppression reversals in addition to the predictable patriarchal, masculine hegemonic themes identified.

Through CVDA some visual images, particularly from female participants, revealed that females are able to express that they feel disgruntled with the status quo and therefore challenge existing gender stereotypes through the visual displays. The encoded and decoded meanings reveal that the participants feel critical of their experience of gender dichotomy and inequality in their personal domain. The height of the females in relation to the males in the picture plane is reversed in some images. Females occupying a higher space and males lying on the ground imply a gender role protest—that is, protesting that providing leadership, income and security should not be gender dependent. These shifts within gender constructions, which are displayed, reveal an interpretation that both males and females can perform any role in society and are not bound by biological sex.

Conclusions

Indeed, visual images are worth more than a thousand words. From the findings above it can be concluded that due to different cultural backgrounds, a diversity of visual evidence in an image and the knowledge which the viewer-reader brings to visual interpretation there are multiple interpretations available. As Burns (2011) suggests, print-based, televisual and web-based ODL learning materials can cover a wide range of issues across cultures and hence the authorship and readership should consider cross-cultural issues in the content interpretation. Thus, when a specific response is required the visual signs need to be carefully encoded.

A need for clear interpretation skills is inevitable, particularly for the ODL cohort, because using images is inevitable and prominent to date in the various models for ODL. An informed analysis of the visual displays revealed more hidden evidence from the images than what the participants had seen initially.

The placement of human figures (males or females) within a picture frame can evoke gendered interpretations from first sight because there are cultural ideologies imbedded in the minds of the viewers which they carry all the time when viewing an image. Closely related, it can also be concluded that visual images with human subjects involve the viewer-reader at a personal level more than when reading texts because he/she can relate in terms of ideologies, culture and experience to concrete characters.

Recommendations

Findings from this study have revealed that gender as a social phenomenon is intricately and abundantly evident in visual displays. Based on these findings, visual pedagogy is at liberty to draw themes for visual analysis, criticism and production which emanate from contemporary topical social issues such as gender, natural disasters (floods or draughts), and epidemics like Ebola and AIDS which the learners experience and are familiar with. Using visual images from contemporary visual culture, educators should engage teacher education students in creating awareness, analysing and commenting on contemporary visual images which depict contemporary critical issues so that these students will in turn

inculcate similar sensitivities in their learners. The analysis and interpretation of contemporary visual images which relate to their culture can be more effective for ODL teacher education students' inquiry skills to explore embedded social and cultural constructs.

These recommendations are based on the goal to bring to awareness guidelines which lead and direct the mind of the implied viewer/reader to a connotative level of visual interpretation. This develops a culture of reading visual images rather than scanning through images for the open distance learner. Several scholars have suggested steps of interpreting images (Albert 2009; Barrett 2011; Kress 2010; Rose 2012). They all concur that this process basically has three steps, namely description, analysis and interpretation. There are, however, small variations within each of these authors' works due to terminology and points of emphasis. Barrett (2011) suggests four stages in the visual interpretation procedure: describing, analysing subject matter, analysing medium, and finally interpretation.

Table 1 below shows a visual analysis strategy (critical visual interpretation model) which I have developed and recommend in conjunction with using visual pedagogy (Dziwa 2016). The ODL learner needs to have some appreciation of visual literacy to read effectively visual content.

Table 1: Critical visual interpretation model (CVIM)

Stage 1: Form identification	Stage 1: Form identification What objects, forms and shapes do you see in the image? Are there identifiable referents in the real visual world? This involves the process of identifying the signs presented in the images. This is a complicated act which is culture specific because the relationship between the signifier and signified may at times be arbitrary, but mostly tends to be contextual in nature.
Stage 2: Framing analysis	Stage 2: Framing analysis This is a process of delineating the focus of the viewer by directing attention to the scene(s). Where is it set? Where is it happening? What is happening? Why is it like that? What other options are available? How can it be changed or made different?
Stage 3: Justification or ordering— drawing the matrix	Stage 3: Justification or ordering Drawing the matrix entails the act of showing relations within the visual text. Here one asks questions such as the following: Where do you start and which sequence do you follow? Visual elements entail a language which is a self-contained system whose interdependent parts function within the whole. Signs function not through their intrinsic value but through their relative positions in a text or society. Concepts also derive their meaning from their opposites so that a deconstructive approach may be valuable when interpreting a visual image (compare with Derrida 1991). This can also be employed in reading in order to transform the status quo and seek alternatives not presented in the frame.
Stage 4: Verification	Stage 4: Verification This stage involves individuals explaining the established relationships with reference to specific forms of knowledge which they possess from their socio-cultural, educational, religious, or artistic backgrounds or visual culture to solve a problem. All forms of knowledge available to the learner, such as tacit knowledge, practical knowledge and technical knowledge, are all brought together in creating a practical verifiable solution related to the problem identified. Relationships identified tend to confer meaning on concepts, artefacts and objects that are part of visual culture (often by means of thinking intertextually about the image and its contexts).

Adopted from Dziwa (2016)

Guided by the critical visual interpretation model (CVIM) proposed above (Table 1), students are encouraged to critically interpret the visual culture that shapes their identities,

beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge in order to problematise, critique, and seek alternative interpretations. CVIM is a synthesis of other interpretative frameworks, such as the social semiotic framework (Kress 2003), deconstructionism (Derrida 1982) and intertextuality (Kristeva 1980), which encourage students to understand the relationship between their own lives and the world of artworks. However, it is not complete on its own as the viewer comes to an image with his/her own engraved perceptions and knowledge. Thus CVIM notes in verifying interpretations that inferences are made based on various forms of knowledge available to the viewer who is not bound to visual experiences only but also to engraved cultural experiences.

Derrida's (1982) deconstruction is extended by the CVIM in terms of its limitation in relying too much on evidence outside the picture's frame (the opposites) through framing analysis. Framing analysis is crucial in CVIM as it focuses on extrapolating multiple interpretations from the evidence presented in the frame(s) identified.

Through critical visual pedagogy, learners and teachers need to discuss and dispel stereotypes and social prejudices which appear in visual culture by exploring multiple interpretations enhanced by using CVIM. Visuals contain an infinite amount of information which is not static in time and culture (Derrida 1982). CVIM, unlike other interpretative frameworks, is dynamic and transformative and hence is the most suitable methodological contribution to a visual pedagogy for ODL students.

Summary

To sum up, the study revealed that the contemporary hyper visual age is unavoidable and affects all learners in one way or another. Visual images address and reveal polarised gender perceptions or constructions in a profound way, but the meaning extrapolated depends on the viewer's capability and visual literacy level. For instance, participants in the visual narratives showed objects differentiated by size, height and volume as translations of the gender hierarchy differences which exist between males and females. Also, gender displays in this study revealed women sitting on the ground and men sitting on a high stool as a natural expression of subordination in day-to-day life. However, the images revealed some deeper gender constructs that even reflect affective and emotional characteristics. The participants more clearly alluded to the denotative coining of meaning as opposed to the deeper connotative meaning also available from the images as signs. Thus, there should be simultaneous growth between the use of images in ODL and visual literacy. It is imperative therefore from the discussion above that ODL must adapt to accommodate these multisensory demands for learning. Employing visual inquiry pedagogy promotes individual engagement.

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