Conceptualising Visual Learning as an Embodied and Performative Pedagogy for all Classrooms

Conceptualización del Aprendizaje Visual como Pedagogía Representada y Performativa en las Aulas

Conceptualiser l’apprentissage visuel comme une pédagogie incarnée et performative

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ABSTRACT
The challenge for arts educators is to find language and conceptual framings for visual art education that resonate with the transformative and literacy aims of mainstream education and position visual learning as core and visual proficiency as essential. The unique value of visual knowing is now an imperative in our ocular-centric culture where new technologies, consumerism, and unprecedented mobility impact on all students in the twenty-first century. Visual creative adaptability and its culturally located critical and generative understandings draw from our sense-rich world of human experience. Grounded in the theories of communicative knowing (Habermas, 1976); becoming as the experience of performing self (Deleuze, 1990, 2004); experience and creativity as personal agency (Semetsky, 2003); and informed by socio-cultural inquiry, visuality, and art practice as research (Sullivan, 2005), the research connects explicitly to socio-cultural values. This paper presents a conceptual model of Visual Embodied and Performative Pedagogy, as a renewed language for visual arts education.

The paper argues that deeply felt and enacted visual experience, as art-making, is central to personal socio-cultural inquiry and subjectivity insights. The paper will foreground the theory behind embodied art-making as it informs an individuals’ understandings of self with empirical Australian visual education research, between 2004–2007 (Dinham, Grushka, MacCallum, Brown, Wright, & Pasco, 2007; Grushka, 2009). The research centres the significance of images in society and the need for all students to develop visual communicative competencies. The benefits of working with images as socially embedded and embodied visual inquiry are argued. In so doing it calls into question the established primary role of images in learning as illustrative. It argues that learning through imaging acts is now an essential conduit for knowing and
the mediation and communication of ideas and feelings in the new image-oriented society.

**Key words:** visuality; visual communicative proficiency; embodied education; performative pedagogy; ethico-aesthetic learning.

**RESUMEN**

Los desafíos para los profesores de artes son encontrar marcos conceptuales y de lenguaje para la educación en artes visuales que repercutan en los objetivos de transformación y alfabetización de la educación formal y posicionar el aprendizaje visual como idea central y la destreza visual como elemento esencial. El valor único de la competencia visual es ahora un imperativo en la cultura oculocéntrica donde las nuevas tecnologías, el consumismo y una movilidad sin precedentes tienen impacto en todos los estudiantes del siglo XXI. La adaptabilidad creativo-visual y sus comprensiones críticas y generativas localizadas culturalmente se derivan de nuestro mundo de experiencia humana, de sentidos enriquecidos. Basándose en las teorías de la competencia comunicativa (Habermas, 1976), la transformación como experiencia del comportamiento del yo (Deleuze, 1990, 2004), la experiencia y la creatividad como agencia personal (Semetsky, 2003), e informado por la indagación socio cultural, la visualidad y la práctica del arte como investigación (Sullivan, 2005), este estudio se relaciona de manera explícita con los valores socio culturales. El artículo presenta un modelo conceptual de Pedagogía Visual Representada y Performativa, como un lenguaje renovado para la pedagogía en educación artística.

El presente artículo sostiene que la experiencia visual que se representa y se siente con profundidad, como creación artística, es crucial para la comprensión personal del cuestionamiento y la subjetividad sociocultural. En el estudio se pondrá en primer plano la teoría subyacente a la creación artística representada, en tanto que reporta las comprensiones que un individuo tiene del yo de acuerdo con la investigación empírica sobre la educación visual australiana, realizada entre 2004 y 2007 (Dinham, Grushka, MacCallum, Brown, Wright, & Pasco, 2007; Grushka, 2009). La investigación enfoca el significado de las imágenes en la sociedad y la necesidad de todos los estudiantes de desarrollar competencias comunicativas visuales. Se discute los beneficios de trabajar con imágenes como cuestionamiento visual arraigado y representado socialmente. De esta manera, el artículo cuestiona el rol principal establecido de las imágenes en el aprendizaje como elemento ilustrativo. Por último, sostiene que el aprendizaje mediante los actos de representación se ha transformado en un conducto esencial para la competencia, además de la mediación y comunicación de ideas y sentimientos en la nueva sociedad, orientada a la imagen.

**Descripores:** visualidad; destreza comunicativa visual; educación representada; pedagogía preformativa; aprendizaje ético-estético.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Le défi pour les éducateurs artistiques est de trouver des encadrements de langage et de concepts pour la formation en arts plastiques qui font écho aux buts de transformation et de connaissances artistiques, et qui positionnent l’apprentissage visuel au centre, et la compétence comme essentielle. La valeur unique des connaissances visuelles est maintenant un impératif dans notre culture centro-oculaire, où les nouvelles technologies, la consommation à outrance et la mobilité sans précédent ont un impact sur tous les étudiants au 21e siècle. L’adaptabilité visuelle créative et ses compréhensions critiques et génératives situées culturellement puissent dans notre monde de l’expérience humaine d’une richesse sensorielle. La recherche relie explicitement aux valeurs socioculturelles, ancrée qu’elle est dans les théories des connaissances de communication (Habermas, 1976); et appropriée à l’expérience du soi performant. (Deleuze 1990, 2004); l’expérience et la créativité comme intermédiaire personnel (Semetsky 2003); et informant par la enquête socioculturelle, la visualité et la pratique de l’art comme recherche (Sullivan 2005.) Ce papier présente un modèle conceptuel de pédagogie incarnée et performative comme langage renouvelé pour la formation en arts plastiques.
Cet exposé soutient que l’expérience visuelle sentie profondément et représentée activement comme création artistique est au centre de la recherche socioculturelle et des idées subjectives. En s’appuyant sur la recherche empirique australienne sur l’éducation visuelle entre 2004 et 2007 (Dinham, Grushka, MacAllum, Brown, Wright & Pasco 2007, Grushka, 2009), l’auteur privilégie la théorie qui soutient la représentation active d’une création artistique qui incarne les compréhensions de soi. La recherche situe au centre l’importance des images dans la société et la nécessité pour tous les étudiants de développer des compétences communicatives visuelles. Les avantages de travailler avec les images en tant qu’incrustées dans la société et avec la recherche visuelle incarnée sont débattus. De ce fait, l’auteur remet en question le rôle illustratif des images, jusque là reconnu primordial, dans l’apprentissage. Il soutient que l’apprentissage par la représentation active est maintenant un conduit essentiel pour connaître et pour la médiation et la communication des idées dans la nouvelle société axée sur l’image.

Mots clés : la visualité ; la compétence communicative visuelle ; l’éducation incarnée ; la pédagogie performative ; l’apprentissage ethico-esthétique.

Introduction

The challenge for arts educators is to find language and conceptual framings for visual art education that resonate with the transformative and literacy aims of mainstream education and position visual learning as essential. The unique value of visual knowing is now an imperative in our ocular-centric culture where new technologies, consumerism, and unprecedented mobility impacts on all students in the twenty-first century (Haraway, 1998; Mirzoff, 1998). Vision and its culturally located critical and generative understandings draw from our sense-rich world of human experience. This paper examines two research projects that focused on the unique learning located in visual education and its essential contribution to the education of citizenship in the twenty-first century. The findings substantiate the original claims of Dewey (1934) for the value of the arts in transformative knowing and for the value of aesthetic knowing achieved through making and communicating using images. The philosophical underpinnings of contemporary theorizing are explored for the contribution of visual arts learning to contemporary communicative and ethico-aesthetic understandings (Guattari, 1995). The adaptive and performative function of socio-cultural inquiry acquired through the visual arts is foregrounded and the essential proficiency of meaning-making with images is identified through empirical visual art education research in Australia.

Visual Technologies, Education and Visual Performative Knowing

The under-valued language of visual arts knowing resonates with the transformative, interactivity, and productive literacy aims of mainstream education (Buckingham, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). In the context of globalization and the proliferation of new digital worlds located in our mobile contemporary life, it is an increasing requirement for each individual to develop the capacity to communicate using rich imagery in tandem with words and/or moving images and sound. The creative dispositions, or agency, fostered in visual arts education, have the capacity to equip the next generation of youth to deal with the infinite possibilities of truths,
about self and other located within the social and political visual narratives that surround contemporary personal experience. Understanding how different knowledge is communicated in a digitized world is now a central concern for all educators. Szerszynski and Urry (2006) direct our attention to the combinational impact of mobility and visuality (ways of seeing and being seen) in current cosmopolitan society. “Our world now consists of the capacity to ‘travel’ corporally, imaginatively and virtually. We consume many places, knowledge spaces and environments, we are curious about many locations and events and we are more prepared to take risks when we encounter ‘other’” (p. 115).


The implications of the ascendency of a visual culture in the arts, sciences, media, and everyday life (Dikovitskaya, 2005) places the image as a key meaning-making cognitive tool as objects of the mind (Stafford, 2007). While visual knowledge has always been primary to thought and expression (Hocks & Kendrick, 2003), the explosion of multimedia or multimodal practices necessitates the central positioning of visualization in learning. Visuality, or critical visual literacy, has emerged as a key concept and has now entered the educational discourse of national research in Australia as visuacy (Davis, 2008). Davis defines visuacy as “involving the ability to create, process, critique and appreciate the spectrum of visual phenomena in the individual’s external and internal environment” (p. 11). Rose (2007) defines visuality as “the way in which vision is constructed” (p. 2). Visuality is a term central to the discourse of all those who work with images. Thompson, N, (2004) refers to the work of artists as strategic visuality, while Emme (2001) talks of visuality in arts teaching. The term addresses synthetic cognitive and physical functioning and their combination, as they inform interdisciplinary understandings that cross between science, art, politics, and literature.

Visual culture education protagonists stress the need and urgency for understanding how visual culture and media mixes are presenting information in visual forms (Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2001, 2003, 2005; Duncum, 2003, 2004; Handa, 2004); more significantly, how new media “privileges practice over theory, production over critique, formal over ideological, and visual over verbal” (Hocks & Kendrick, 2003, p. 5). In acknowledgement of this, visual education and new media learning curriculum designers are re-assessing the role of the image in the new-literacies curriculum (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2005), beyond mainstream literacy debates. Others are attempting to redefine visual arts learning spaces in the classroom for the critical, strategic, and generative understandings they empower (Grushka & Coughlan, 2008; Grushka & Donnelly, 2010) for all students.

It is timely that attention is given to the essential role of creativity and the related skill of adaptability (Dissanayake, 2008) as they inform the construction of images for communicative purposes, agency, and ethical understandings in contemporary society. Agency in this context is the capacity to construct images that carry personal
intentions and actions. When students make images they are communicating their voice within personal understandings of their own constructed realities. These constructed realities, or stories embed an individuals’ social and mental ecology that develops a realization of self-autonomy, as a process of social transformation that happens over time. The act of producing subjectivity is the application of “reason, understanding, will and affectivity” (Guattari, 1995, p. 103). Developing the skills to harness creative and expressive ways to represent, manipulate, and re-represent (Bolt, 2004) knowledge as images carries an ethico-aesthetic dimension and requires each student to take responsibility for their creative output. This presents educators with a new pedagogical tool for critical socio-cultural inquiry and communication beyond words. Imaging acts will become a powerful way to inform identities, beliefs, and values and the real-life experiences of each individual and new media tools will continue to reconstruct our ever-changing world as digital events.

Research Informing Praxis in Visual Art Education

Informing the position presented above are the findings of two empirical research projects that have been informed by current visual art classroom pedagogies and learning outcomes observed in Australia between 2004 and 2007. The first research project “Identity, Image and Meaning Beyond the Classroom: Visual and Performative Communicative Practice in a Visual 21st Century” was a qualitative longitudinal and case study research project in New South Wales between 2002–2007 focusing on the learning outcomes of students in a post-compulsory learning context, one to five years out from school. It focused on the reflections of the students and the value of their visual learning to life beyond the classroom. The second research project was conducted in Australia in 2005–2006 as part of the National Review of Education in Visual Arts, Craft, Design, and Visual Communication. It was a large, national, multi-method research project. This included, a relevant literature and policy context review, an examination of all Australian State and Territory curriculum documents pertaining to Visual Education, a questionnaire of teacher education in Visual Education in Australian universities, a survey of the provision of Visual Education in a stratified random sample of Australian schools, the sampling of sites of effective practice, and focus groups and interviews with teachers, students, and art professionals. The case study component was an “in-depth examination of perspectives and practice identified in the earlier broad-ranging methods” (Dinham, Grushka, MacCallum, Pascoe, Wright, & Brown, 2007, p. 79). This short paper attempts to focus on the visual pedagogical intersection emerging from both research projects.

The term ‘Visual Education’ emerged in the national research project as a new conceptualisation in the field of education that conceptually and organisationally responds to new developments in twenty-first century digital communication and the need for a creative workforce (Davis, 2008). Visual Education is presented as a pedagogical orientation that sees traditional and emergent visual communicative practices being redefined and reconfigured to embrace time-based elements, moving images, interactivity, sounds, music, and alternatives beyond the constraints of traditional art media and
beyond reading and writing as paper text that has always included images as illustration, diagrams, or models. Future citizens experiencing the rapid technological change, globalization, and social networking require a more wide-ranging set of skills and understandings (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Anstey & Bull, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2005) about the way we can communicate using images. A pedagogical model ‘A Model for Visual Education’ was developed from the second research project (Dinham, Wright, Pascoe, MacCullum & Grushka, 2007; Grushka, 2009). The model recognised that students of tomorrow have an increasing need to be visually proficient within an understanding of aesthetic, artistic, and cultural concepts, in order to function in the contemporary world.

“Visual Education includes aesthetic understandings and artistic sensibilities; generation of visual and spatial ideas; development and application of skills, techniques and processes; responding to, reflecting on and making informed judgments; and, understanding personal, social, cultural, spiritual, historical and economic significance. It engages with traditional knowledge and processes associated with different media, art, craft and design forms, 2D, 3D formats, time-based art and a wide range of genres from different times, places and cultures, as well as the multi-modalities of emerging technologies and the evolving nature of artistic practice” (Dinham, Wright, Pascoe, MacCullum & Grushka, 2007; Grushka, 2009, p. 79).

The ‘Model of Visual Education’ was presented as “a pedagogical framework for the purposeful development of students’ practical, aesthetic, creative, and professional skills and knowledge to enable effective engagement with the visual in a multiplicity of ways within social and cultural contexts. At its core Visual Education is about creative practices; — learning by doing — using innovation, skill and imagination to make meaning” (Dinham, Wright, Pascoe, MacCallum & Grushka, 2007, p.79) in an interconnected or interdisciplinary orientation. This model presented four key fields:

1. Studio-based experiences: where learning is authentic, experimental, practical, embodied, and cognitive in a studio-centred community of inquiry. It is space where the skill of critical ‘visuality’ is developed.
2. Working with materials (materiality). Material experiences connect students intimately to the experiences of seeing, feeling, and forming materials through technologies to express ideas.
3. Relationships of trust. The studio-learning environment is characterised by relationships of trust, between students, students, and teachers in the co-construction of knowledge.
4. Applied aesthetic understanding. Pedagogical practices that support the development of aesthetic and ethical thinking through expressive, interpretive, and reflective behaviors in technological and material-based practices.

The four fields have been described as being what the researchers call agency. Agency in this Visual Education model is represented as personal, social, and cultural action.
or choice. Through action and choice students participate in contemporary society and engage in emancipatory discourses (Denzin, 2005).

The term ‘visual and performative communicative practice’ emerged from the findings of the first research project, as a way to further describe the embedded skills of visual proficiency, and drew on theoretical insights about the embodied and performative potential or voice of students found in the images they constructed (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991; Bolt, 2004; O’Loughlin, 2006; Thompson, E., 2004). The student images, often portraits and stories, or narratives about themselves, their friends and family, or the events that shaped their lives and their struggles in adolescence were central to their socio-cultural inquiry and subjectivity insights. In a society pre-occupied with self, technologies and the consumer imperative, visual proficiency embeds ethical dimensions of learning that were found to nurture heritage, culture, and values (Grushka, 2009).

Both research projects foregrounded a world of accelerating change where students need dispositions of adaptability that provide them with the capacity to respond in imaginative and positive ways, to express their feelings and considered thoughts about themselves and the world around them. Both identified the benefits of the skill of visuality and the value of a socially-embedded and inquiry-based personal learning (Goodson & Deakin-Crick, 2009).

While the Visual Education study attended essentially to the practices and ideas of those working in the field, teachers, policy and curriculum designers, and school administrators, the Identity, Image and Meaning Beyond the Classroom study focused on the value of the learning to the students, teachers, and parents. Both studies focus on the primacy of the visual and the current undervaluing of visual communicative proficiency and its related learning outcomes. Both argue from different orientations that visuality is an essential skill for the mediation of ideas and feelings in the new image-oriented society and that a pedagogy and curriculum that attended to various semiotic registers in contemporary contexts, through personal inquiry strategies, was important to the students and their parents.

**Visual Embodied and Performative Pedagogy: Visual Learning as Becoming**

The emergence of a model of Visual Embodied and Performative Pedagogy for the Classroom (Figure 1, below) resulted from the analysis of both research projects discussed above. This analysis comes from the challenge taken up by many visual arts educators to find a language and conceptual framing that would resonate with the transformative and literacy aims of mainstream education. Drawing on the pedagogical models from both research projects, the core finding is that learning about self and society is an embodied and performative act that has communicative intentions. When students engage with their own personal life narratives or stories, as experience, and combine this with a praxis that has the skills of visuality and personal socio-cultural inquiry as a key element, you have the conceptual components for exploration of communicative understandings. When combined with material and
technological practices that are nurtured in an ethico-aesthetic learning environment, the result is authentic artifact(s) or artwork(s).

Visual performative pedagogy is presented as an embodied socio-cultural inquiry praxis. This praxis requires the student to seek meanings about self and society through tangible artifacts that connect directly to the media-saturated life-worlds of the students. In this context, students are able to address questions about who they are and how they have come to be this way and to contemplate and communicate ideas about what they wish to become.

Artifacts or artworks therefore contain and communicate deeply felt, personal, life experiences as narratives. Images are part of our cultural traditions and therefore contribute to our fundamental psychological and emotional need to make things (Dissanyake, 2008). The model above focuses on a studio learning environment or classrooms that centre personal inquiry and exhibition pedagogies that contribute to the resolution of students’ intentions to communicate aspects of their subjectivities. The ongoing creation of images for communicative purposes can therefore inform an individual’s understandings about the processes of change and becoming in adolescence. When students make images in these learning contexts they connect with their storied lives and work within an ethico-aesthetic context.

In performative approaches to pedagogy, the importance of the individual, their creativity, and their aesthetic responses are affirmed as they relate directly to the vernacular of an individual’s everyday life (Dissanyake, 2008) and personal agency (Semetsky, 2003). In this context, youth investigate life experiences through an analysis of fine art, popular cultural and social practices. Students explore how other artists transfer personal and collective values and belief systems of society and how, through self-reflection they communicate their understandings as intentional

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**Figure 1.** A model of Visual Embodied and Performative Pedagogy for the Classroom

Grushka, 2010
acts drawing on the visual technologies that resonate with their communicative intentions.

Visual arts, as socio-cultural inquiry praxis draws on the skill of visuality, to critically decode and encode meaning using images taken from cultural life. Images as re-representational acts of becoming (Bolt, 2004), connect the student at a deep level to things and experiences revealing their aesthetic value and personal life possibilities. Making sense of and elaborating on experience is central to meaning making and communicative action (Habermas, 1976, 1990). Contemporary art curriculum, as performative pedagogy, centres the critical qualitative experience of self with the wider society informed increasingly by the dominance of the visual in new media. It draws on educational thought that presents curriculum as an agent of social reproduction (Dewey, 1934), and visual art education as a platform for engaged and transformative learning (Eisner, 2001, 2002), with creativity emerging as the link for literacies as social capital (Buckingham, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008).

From this position Visual Art Education is presented as a method of social inquiry that explores existence as cultural communicative acts and offers future possibilities of self. It involves the imagination, perception, and interpretation of the qualities of things as well as the mastery of skills of artistic representation and communicative intentions. These critical and subjective making acts in turn evoke intangible aspects of the human condition (Dissanyake, 2008) and provide a powerful means for personal agency.

Conclusion

The research findings, presented in The Model Visual Embodied and Performative Pedagogy for the Classroom illustrates that the visual has significant potential as a conduit for knowledge acquisition and meaning making in the digital environment and supports critical literacy, interactivity, experimentation, and production which are vital to attaining the tenets of transformative education. Each artwork or artifact carries the identities of its maker and the embodied and interactive acts of making that enact agency. The skill of visuality and its culturally located, critical and generative understandings are a significant learning outcome that informs identities and becoming as it draws on our sense-rich world of human experience and the change phenomenon. Embodied, performative pedagogies lie at the heart of contemporary visual arts curriculum. A curriculum that values personalised enquiry, the uniqueness of each student and their capacities to find innovative and adaptive ways of working with traditional and new visual technologies to communicate their world may have a place in all classrooms.

The benefits of socially embedded and embodied visual inquiry are presented as a significant key to communicative knowing in contemporary society. Visual proficiency is now an essential skill or key literacy. Visual Education and its visual performative pedagogies have a role to play in new media literacies beyond the current recognized role within the field of contemporary arts practices and visual arts education.
Image and text now interpenetrate one another. Mobility and visuality along with the skill of adaptability, it is argued, have become essential ways of knowing for the mediation of ideas, feelings, and identities in an image and change oriented society. The embodied and performative pedagogies of the arts offer unique understandings for socio-cultural learning and have a core role in the education of citizens of the twenty-first century.

References


