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Some words about cultural identity and visual communication

The world is bringing us a lot of moments to think of the condition of societies, the expand of multiculturalism and the feeling of being ourselves in a constantly changing, mosaic reality, which is pushing us to make choices we usually are not mentally prepared for. The situation of the contemporary human being we describe often from the perspective of the phenomena of the post-modern world, like actionormative dispersion, consumptionism, [...], crisis of identity, lost of stable well-known points of cultural identity, [...] withdrawal of parents and teachers from the duty of upbringing [...]. The peculiar actuality, in this context, bringing headwords [...] of the need of intensification, in perspective of further existence and development of the world, so called human factor, that is creative presence of a thinking, active, sensitive person¹. The task of contemporary education is to build a person who is sensitive and wise enough to be able to choose from the multiplicity of cultural offers and to judge them according to universal rules and values as much as to be individual who can recognize personal ideas and values.

When the world becomes more and more global, people feel more and more local. People identify themselves primarily with their locality. Territorial identity is a fundamental anchor of belonging that is not even lost in the rapid process of generalized urbanization we are now experiencing.[...] When people need to expand their community, they refer to their nations, their island in the global ocean of flows of capital, technology and communication². The more important in such circumstances is to understand processes taking place around us.

What we should understand about a culture is its role for keeping together our social activities in connection with our behaviour, communication, relationships and

¹ E. Murawska, *Przyszłość jako edukacyjne wyzwanie współczesności- w kierunku futurologii pedagogicznej*, [in:] D. Zalewska ed., *Granice poznania przyszłości*, OPSIS, Wrocław 2009, p. 129

² M. Castells, *The Power of Identity, volume II*, Willey-Blackwell, Chichester 2010, p. XXIII.

other social patterns. Literature always emphasizes the importance of culture. It can be defined in different ways, but usually it is strongly connected with communication. Culture is the way of life of people. It is the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things³. Hall also considers the culture as a code that we learn and share, and this learning and sharing is making communication wider and stronger. We may consider culture as a belief system and value orientation, as a kind of theoretical manifestation, but cultural practice is much more practical by the influence of customs, norms, practices like language, care taking practice, media and educational systems. What is connected with the act of social behaviour in culture involves communication as a platform for transmitting ideas and behaviours. In classification, communication can be divided into three types: verbal (use of words with specific meanings), paraverbal (tone of the voice), and non-verbal communication⁴. It also has various components, such as, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding and receiver response in achieving success in communication⁵.

The verbal communication process in Western culture is described as, involving a speaker, the speech act, an audience, and a purpose⁶. And as communication is strongly related to culture, every culture has different strategies of communication and must search to develop and maintain a process of cross cultural understanding. Language is one of the main elements of communication. Even all languages are similar in linguistic structure, they may express different cultural aspects⁷. It also could express more difficult meaning structures to communicate but it needs the same level of receiving the communicate. This practice shows difficulties with understanding in wider range of nations.

Non-verbal communication shows attitudes, emotions and feelings using different gestures and motions. During non-verbal communication not all motions and gestures are intentional but all facial expressions, gestures, and body language have a strong impact on the communication between people from one and also different cultures. Although gestures could lead to some misunderstandings, emotions expressed by our body are very recognisable no matter of time and space of communication.

Effective communication with people of different cultures is a very difficult task. Cultures are giving to their members special ways of thinking, seeing, hearing and interpreting the world. So even when people from different cultures speak the same language, the base for communication like space context, tradition influences etc remains different. When the languages are different and translation has to be

³ E. Hall, *The hidden dimension*, Anchor Books, New York 1969, p. 20.

⁴ G.P. Ferraro, *The cultural dimension of international business*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey 1990, p. 45.

⁵ F. Jandt, *An introduction to intercultural communication*, 4th ed., Sage Publications, London 2004.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁷ B.A. Fisher, *Perspectives on human communication*, Macmillan, New York 1978.

used to communicate, the potential for misunderstandings in given messages even increases. Considering all those arguments the key to effective cross-cultural communication is knowledge of the potential problems and of possibilities to overcome these problems.

Multicultural communication at the crossroads of our languages, cultures and behaviors needs multicultural education based on shared knowledge and language acquisition. A correspondence between our language and cultural behaviors is leading to the need of creating the educational environment for preparing everyone to a mutual understanding. So we should pay more attention to our differences or similarities in behaviors, practice, opinions, knowledge, culture, tradition and history. As now we are searching for an environmental, social, political, economic or cultural balance in the world, so the quality of intercultural communication is one of the main global issues. Such task is leading us to find out not the exact meaning of words to increase communication between cultures, but to look for all what is hidden in words, what could be read from non-verbal behaviors and from the language of pictures and signs which could show that we can communicate easier than while keeping so much attention to words.

It is important to expand and update the process of acquisition and inquiry abilities to understand, judge and use our abilities to understand messages and transmit them amongst people. These processes are rooted in childhood. With time individual culture is changing into a complex set of values, beliefs, customs, practices, knowledge, techniques and systems related to space and time, unique to a particular group we call culture. It is a significant part of having self identity and it is created to be transmitted.

We experience the world mostly through our eyes. Our knowledge of the visual process and psychology of seeing and experiencing visual reality is leading to the development of many new forms of visual communication. Our brain is a target to reach through our eyes. This valuable target for visual content, for messages should be reached easily and should make an impression. Visual communication comes in many forms. Many of them are designed to entertain us, to make a deep connection to a message through moving images, colours and attractive forms. Visual technologies become more and more sophisticated and focussed on an exact target. Some forms of visual communication remain primitive and deliver information in a fast and easily recognizable way. But more and more important for visual communication is to be understandable for participants of different cultures.

As to all forms of communication, the first what is important to do is to determine what we want to say and to communicate this message effectively: we must know what the message is. Effective visual communication is achieved by displaying information in a way that enables people to see an exact representation of a message and understand what the audience can see. To do this, it is needed to understand rules of visual perception and cognition. Well-designed information presents a message with meaningful trends and is expressed in a medium that is particularly

good for that message by taking advantage of visual perception. To those rules a set of graphic skills, based more on knowledge rooted in an understanding than artistic imagination, must be added. If we can understand how perception works, our knowledge can be translated into rules for displaying information. Following perception based rules, we can present our data in such a way that the important and informative patterns stand out. If we disobey the rules, our data will be incomprehensible or misleading⁸. Communication is most effective when a message says neither more nor less than what is relevant to the message.

To obtain more information about the upper theory several meetings with students in the Art Academy of Nitra (Slovakia) and pupils of the International School in Maastricht (The Netherlands) were organized. The main aim for meeting with students and pupils was to realize together that living in a multicultural world we must come to the knowledge of our own system of communication and to understand the main streams of thinking of people with whom we want to communicate. Such knowledge used for visual conversations is letting to catch the attention of the person to whom we are visually talking and want to be sure that our message will be the one we want to give. This is creating possibilities for building a platform for work or sign we are using to give information and receive feedback understandable for both sites of visual or visual-verbal conversation. This ability is very needed in many different fields like education, advertisement, social and also personal context of living. Exploring the world of verbal and visual communication took place with participants for whom English was not their origin language, so we could discover effects without the influence of priority of any group. For the workshops it was important to not influence or touch the basis of cultural identity connected with nationality or language, while searching rather for what is similar than what is different in trans-cultural language communication.

One of the tasks given to the students of Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre during workshops connected with verbal and non-verbal communication had connection with pictures from our past we still keep in our memory. Students were asked to draw or describe images from their memory coming from childhood.

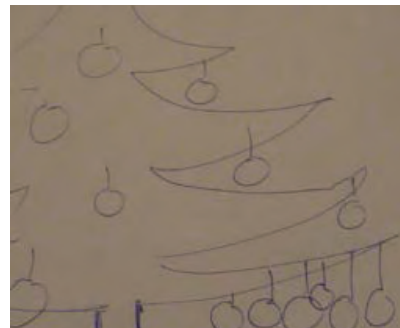
The illustrations above show that, when we are trying to recall our childhood, our memory most often is travelling to the same moments of feeling save, good and pleased. Christmas, games and plays, parents or grand-parents or places filled with timeless beauty like sunsets are those moments that are becoming for a majority of people symbols of the self past. We all can understand and recognize those symbols, even the connections with emotions are much more difficult to describe and value.

From these simple visual exercises students can learn the basics of understanding rules for visual communication. Communication based more on pictures than on words is building links between people, no matter on verbal problems connected with the difference of used languages. Pictures being beyond borders of verbal

⁸ C. Ware, *Information Visualization*, 2nd edition, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers Inc., 2004, p. xxi.

communication are more individual, personal than words. They seem to be also more communicative although they underline the self identity of a person.

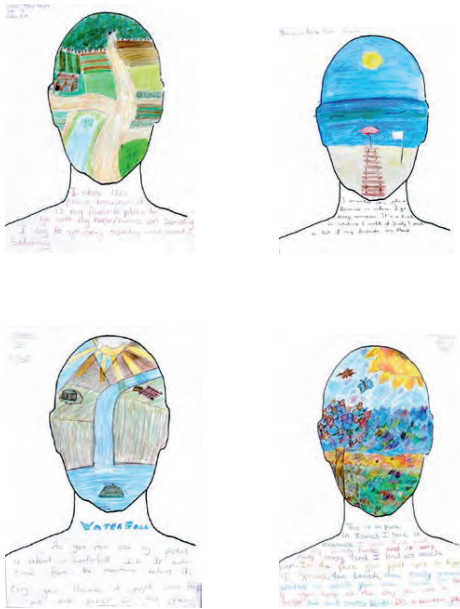
A similar task but combining verbal expression and visual memories was given to pupils age 14 in an International School. They were asked to recall and describe a place which is kept in their mind.



Nowadays, in many available studies, training programmes and activities, courses in cultural communications are included, which generally underlines the importance of cultural and cross-cultural communication skills.

Postmodern philosophers have deconstructed the concept of identity and the social categories it interacts with. Modernity differs from all preceding forms of social order because of its dynamism, deep involvement in understanding of traditional habits and customs, and realizes its global impact. It also radically uncovers the

general nature of daily life and the most personal aspects of human activity, feelings, emotions and behaviours. Modernity is increasing interconnection between globalizing influences and personal dispositions. Self-identities, individuals even being very local in their contexts of action, can be very global in their consequences and implications. Our identity is mainly influenced by our social surroundings. There is a very strong link between family circumstances and how education is giving shape to the identity of individuals, and all that is also linked to the global net of communication.



Neither the life of an individual, nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding connections between them and ideas which create both. Now that individuals can influence so much our society and vice versa our society influences individuals, the fact that both individuals and societies are more and more multicultural is very important. There is no straight and easy relationship between identity and social concepts. Our identities are embedded in a Web of Identity, which is a visual representation of the intersection between identity and society. The Web of Identity illustrates that the interaction between identity and social structure is complex and multi-layered⁹. Even more when the individual increases its own cross-cultural contacts.

We must create a living dialogue between heritage, existence, remembrance and creativity in communication. The combination of what we remember must be in balance with what we are currently experiencing and we must know how

⁹ C. Livesey, *Culture and identity, Sociological Pathways*. <http://www.sociology.org.uk/pathway2.htm> [30.03.2013].

to communicate this balanced construction. We must realize our responsibility to investigate all types of communication, to continue exploring what we are, what makes us different, where we are going, where we came from, what we want, what we believe in and how to express ourselves. We must see memory and forgetfulness as a source for evolving understanding of ourselves and people involved in the communicational system. Cultural heritage is also a part of this communication and is placed in the centre of human development precisely because it articulates what we receive as material and spiritual values to share with future generations. Cultural heritage as an expression of values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions is in constant evolution and now also must embrace relations among individuals, their territories and the environment.

Kilka słów o tożsamości kulturowej i komunikacji wizualnej

Streszczenie

Wszystko w kulturze związane jest z zachowaniami społecznymi i komunikacją jako platformą przekazywania myśli i zachowań. Kluczem do międzykulturowego porozumienia jest wiedza o potencjalnych problemach i sposobach ich rozwiązywania. Związek zachowań kulturowych i języka wskazuje na potrzebę stworzenia edukacyjnego środowiska dla przygotowania wszystkich uczestników kultury do wzajemnego zrozumienia. Wiedza o procesach wizualnych i psychologii widzenia, wizualne doświadczanie rzeczywistości prowadzi do rozwoju różnych form komunikacji wizualnej. Podczas warsztatów eksplorowano świat werbalnej i wizualnej komunikacji, poszukując raczej podobieństw niż różnic. Głównym celem spotkania ze studentami i uczniami było wspólne zrozumienie, że żyjąc w świecie wielokulturowym, musimy zrozumieć swój system komunikacji, którego podstawę stanowią zdarzenia z naszej przeszłości.

Nota o autorze

Dr Monika Nęcka jest wykładowcą na Wydziale Sztuki Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego oraz w Katedrze Edukacji Artystycznej ASP w Krakowie. Współpracuje z Międzynarodowym Centrum Kultury w Krakowie jako metodyk działań edukacyjnych, wchodzi w skład zespołu przygotowującego pracę Uniwersytetu Dzieci i Rodziców UP, sprawuje opiekę merytoryczną nad projektem portalu „24h sztuka” w Bunkrze Sztuki. Jako doradca metodyczny projektów współpracuje z Muzeum Narodowym – Pałac Biskupa Erazma Ciołka, z MIKiem w zakresie oceny projektów w ramach Skarby Małopolski oraz przy organizacji spotkań Gaudium Et Spes. Współorganizuje Twórcze Spotkania Bez Barrier i Festiwal Dziecięcych Marzeń. Opracowała, a obecnie koordynuje i ewaluje, program dotyczący identyfikacji narodowej dla Szkół Międzynarodowych w EU – „Picture from the Past for the Future”. Jest autorką programu z historii sztuki dla klas młodszych *Spotkania dzieci ze sztuką*. Od 1993 roku jest członkiem Polskiego Komitetu Międzynarodowego Stowarzyszenia Wychowania przez Sztukę InSEA.