Beyond the visual experience: Comprehending parallel realities.

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ABSTRACT

There is evidence of the anthropological enterprise being an eye-opening endeavour in itself, telling stories of the human existence with its intrinsic beauty and inherent evocative message. Visual anthropology as a technology enhancer can heighten the narrative, being able to guide the viewer past the optical involvement by transporting the mind in a territory of near virtual reality, not available otherwise. This study contemplates the use of the visual perception instrument in the classroom as a conveyor of simulated alternative actualities, potentially representing a powerful facilitator of empathy towards human diversity and related agency array.

Ethnographic research findings, corroborated by cognitive and psychological studies, suggest that the visual catalyst, employed as a tool in adult educational settings, can result in a valuable device for transferring understanding of unity in relation to human engagement. The same can also act as a means able to communicate the importance of knowledge and acceptance of the other, ultimately providing a vehicle towards prejudice reduction.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This work is inspired by the feeling of astonishment in the presence of the extraordinary qualities in relation to human expression, with its connected heart and imagination. Simultaneously, it is enthused by sentiments of bewilderment before inherent weaknesses and tries to address these. Depictions of human nature emerge multifaceted due to its strikingly formidable complexity. Some paradoxical characteristics recurrently appear to surface within the human condition.

In fact, awe could be triggered in front of the contemplation of the magnificent cognitive apparatus. For instance, the creation of schemas (Bartlett 1932; Brewer & Treyens 1981; Mandler 1984; Shank & Abelson 1977) and the use of pre-existing schemas (Sweller 2003) are key to perception and resultant memory reconstruction by facilitating the systematisation of information and establishing cognitive efficiency, so that our brain can make sense of the world in a very fast way.

And yet, our brain employs the same sophisticated mechanism in the process of stereotyping (Katz & Braly 1933) and consequent threats (Shih et al. 1999, Steele & Aronson 1995), which can be the very first step to an escalation of expressions of prejudice and potentially paving the way to discrimination and implementations of some of the most extreme exclusionary practices. Furthermore, following a primacy effect (Asch 1946), individuals can formulate a lasting impression when meeting a person for the first time.

On another level, a sense of wonder could be felt in connection to the magnificent emotional, instinctive drive of human beings, as a human species to be social animals and

consequently social by nature, with a tendency to reach for others. As far as the brain is concerned, social rejection hurts as much as a broken bone, since same neural pathways are activated during physical pain and social exclusion (Eisenberger & Lieberman 2004, Kross et al. 2011)

Yet, human inclination to conformity could be another cause in instances where the fear of being socially excluded drives individuals to joining group views and behaviours that, as a result, exclude others (Asch 1956).

The elected tool for analysis that is visual is not randomly selected. The consideration that vision can be seen as the driving sense in human perception (McGurk & MacDonald 1976; Calvert et al. 2004; O'Shea 2005) paves the way for the recognition of visual media embedding the potential to create learning environments of inclusive learning. It is achieved by taking the audience beyond the ordinary visual experience (Mitchell 2005), by inherently tendering a multi-sensory input, in a sort of augmented reality, similar to an immersive multimedia simulation that a virtual reality experience could provide (Biocca & Levy 1995; Dinh et al. 1999; Garb 1987).

There appears to be also some evidence of visual modalities having the potential of being providers of efficient information recall. An example of such possibility could be represented by The Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer 2001; Mayer & Massa 2003) which suggests the materialisation of a more efficient transference of concepts employing diverse methods of sensory input, where exposure to multi-sensory environments offers individuals a somehow easier recall of information. Learners appear to profit more from knowledge acquisition through words and pictures blended than solely words (Mayer & Simms 1994), and the amalgamation of narration and video is more powerful than the one of narration and text (Mayer 2005). In The Dual Coding theory (Paivio 1969, 1971, 1986), a scenario is depicted in which information of both visual and verbal nature is stored unconnectedly in memory. Consequently, concepts encoded in words are exclusively encoded verbally. Conversely, concepts acquired in picture form are stowed both visually and verbally, in what emerges dually. After multimedia presentations, it seems more likely for information to be recalled later on (Brunye et al. 2008).

Visual resources generally facilitate an enhanced learning experience. In fact, the image holds the quality of assisting and boosting learning (Reed 2010), while data represented visually and verbally show to transmit meaning in a more efficient manner (Sternberg 2003). Additionally, the usage of animation presents itself as a tool for learning enhancement (Park

1994; Tversky, Bauer-Morrison & Betrancourt 2002).

The visual means in its various forms is contemplated in this paper as a potential generator of intergroup awareness and, by virtue of this, proposed as a prospective facilitator of empathy.

Visual instruments intrinsically own the power of narrating stories and implanting ideas, in an emotionally charged escalation, entangling various neuro pathways and granting the audience the option of expressing identification with the narrator (Stephens et al. 2010).

Ultimately, whatever the causes of prejudiced expressions ranging from personality type acquisitions (Adorno 1950) or other origins such as lower educational levels (Hyman & Sheatsley 1954), acquisition of cultural and social norms (Brown 1985), competition for limited resources (Sherif 1954, 1958, 1961), or social identity enhancement (Tajfel & Turner 1979), the research directs considerations of possible successful outcomes in its implementation towards prejudice reduction targets.

METHODOLOGY

The inquiry encompasses information from reflections of teaching staff about an array of adult educational settings, predominantly colleges of FE/HE in the North of England and spans various years of fieldwork. In comparable modus to other research by this same author, it bases its exploration on both a primary and a secondary type of scrutiny and configures a series of deliberations on different teaching and learning facets. Distinctively, the use of ethnographic research, where the collection of data is mostly achieved through participant observation, informal conversations, online information, and teaching staff feedback, is then supported by selected published literature within the fields of cognitive science and psychology. This material is successively presented and evaluated as potentially able to corroborate and explain the primary ethnographic findings. Considerations stemming from a psychological perspective distinctively refer to targeted areas of cognitive research relevant to the studied realm. The core motive for the ethnography adoption is to be unearthed in the efficacy that is established through the unique advantaged in-depth opportunity of analysis offered by it (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994). The privileged position of the researcher, being able to partake within the context, which is studied, not as an outer presence, but in the capacity of a true agent able to be part of that same worldview sought to be comprehended, is the compelling motive behind the utilised method of enquiry. The prospect for the researcher to be fully immersed in the setting participating as a real member, rather than an extraneous entity, enables the quest attempt to collect data in the truest reliable manner

and cancels or at least reduces the chances of an observer intrusion effect or any other kinds of meddling to emerge. Features of auto-ethnographic methodology as a lecturer additionally endow a driving contribution to the inquest.

PRIMARY KEY ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

The following is a summary of selected information collected from teaching staff sharing perceptions and experiences in connection with the utilisation of different types of visuals with the aim of creating empathy in the classroom (Field notes, extracts 2011-2014).

The visual resource as powerful storyteller creating simulated intergroup contact:

There are many ways a story can be told... and they all work at some level... but the one of visually portraying it has yet to find a match for its potential to make an audience in contact with a different setting and its manifested world.

Visually portraying something new about different ways of seeing things and life is probably the most direct manner of placing people in contact with those dimensions.

Learners just relate to those stories and actors so quickly. Showing a story through a video introduces the experience of others and, together with that, those others that have the experience. Without that video, there would exist no possibility of such encounters

In a way, by showing how some people live their lives, it is like introducing these people to those who watch them in the video and give the chance of meeting them—an opportunity not found otherwise.

If it is not possible to meet in person people from a different group, it is still possible to make contact and get to know about them through a film, for example.

Efficient conveyor of information and meaning:

A video on something unknown is imbued with a load of data on that specific context, and it makes it for a rich transferral of details about it.

Facts are provided powerfully through visual communication, which gives clear information on the discussed circumstances.

A series of photographs portraying a different cultural group will describe that different world much more efficiently than any other non-visually based resource.

Any visual representation of unknown realms is a fast track to knowledge. In the classroom, it is an extra gear to understanding the other.

Since lack of knowledge is the problem that creates barriers, the action of bringing knowledge through the use of visual media is what breaks those barriers and allows understanding.

Instrument to anxiety reduction:

The added knowledge offered, by more often a video and sometimes a picture, in relation to a new reality, holds the ability to alleviate a somehow otherwise widespread suspicion towards the same.

Watching and getting to know about someone considered dangerous triggers a certain reassurance and transforms it into something more so-called normal.

Knowing what you don't know eliminates the worries that may be attached to the absence of knowledge. Visual media can just do that if used timely

A story of a real-life that is shown on visual media helps towards removing fear that might have been generated from the fact of not knowing about the characters involved in it.

Fear is a type of emotion, and when we bring information into the unknown, we can actually allow ourselves to relax and overcome that fear. Visual media is able to bring in understanding to do just that.

Facilitator of feelings of empathy:

A video portraying a struggle can be working at such an intense level so to trigger that profound understanding of thoughts, feelings, and circumstances of other human beings.

It seems a more natural tendency to look for and recognise agencies of human patterns in situations presented through visual input. It appears nearly automatic.

Stepping in someone else's shoes through a visual experience offered by media can create empathy. It allows for providing a taste of those feelings not pertinent to own experiences.

Visual resources can offer a steppingstone to other people's unique worlds, unavailable otherwise and give the possibility to empathise with those who struggle, for example.

Visually immersion into the alien realm lets you sense the alien experience. To a certain extent can fill that gap arising from the absence of the actual personal experience.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Various strategies in relation to prejudice reduction are proposed stemming from a number of cognitive and social psychological perspectives and applied to a diverse range of frameworks. Overall, diversity training shows no evident contribution to lessening manifestations of discrimination since it is not informed directly by research, and there is a lack of specific feedback on its success (Paluck 2006). Similar outcomes echo in association with the work of the forerunner of diversity training Jane Elliott, whose Blue Eyes Brown Eyes exercise (1970, 1985), which aimed to offer the possibility of stepping into someone else's shoes, promises the opportunity of experiencing an educational simulation of discrimination. While some successes are recorded with children, results with adults are much more moderate in the long term with participants subject to remarkable stress (Byrnes & Kiger 1990, Stewart et al. 2003).

Within the social sciences, there is an unmistakable need for further exploration and quest of alternative avenues with the purpose of decreasing the probabilities of behaviour expressing bias, and a type of classical approaches working towards this challenge focuses on intergroup interactions branching off into different directions in an endeavour of fruitful applications.

One of them concentrates on interdependence (Deutsch 1949a), where co-operation results from the realisation that only collective efforts can constitute the solution to a

communal problem (Deutsch 1949b). However, thought cooperative learning implementations seem to generate some rewards in children's educational settings, it is not clear whether these would apply to adult environments as well or returns are restricted to the experimental context and are not transferable to external ones (Warring et al. 1985). Among these there is the Jigsaw Classroom method (Aronson et al. 1978) in which group members are meant to contribute to a collective issue solution, operating through the sharing of their own unique individual components. Another direction is taken into theorising the case of a social identity (Tajfel & Turner 1979), manifesting in individual favouritism of own in-groups at the expense of outgroups. In such charter, solutions to conflict are found in attempts of decategorisation (Ensari & Miller 2001) by what is classed as individuation, which shifts the attention from group discrepancies to individual ones; or re-categorisation (Gaertner & Dovidio 2000) by shifting the attention that both parties belong to a common overarching group and finally crossed categorization (Crisp & Hewston 1999) by highlighting the fact that both groups belong to a third different one. It is relevant to say that categorization techniques demonstrate some positive outcomes, but it remains difficult to quantify how these are practically transferred into real-life interactions (Paluck & Green 2009), due to studies carried out substantially in laboratory settings (Tajfel 1970). A further branch appears to deliver more strongly in this respect. That is the promise of the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954, Whitley & Kite 2010) where shared goals are proposed, and co-operation instead of competition is promoted (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006) and acquiring knowledge of the other is paramount (Massey & Hodson 1999).

An alternative kind of classical approach is based on an individual immersion within the context but not on intergroup interaction. Therefore, no need for real members interacting but the incidence of full reliance on data agency connected to the sought critical milieu. Efforts from such positions result in more feasible to materialise. The requirement here is based on individual exposure to pertinent and momentous information, with also the option of engagement in the pursuit of addressing prejudice. Tactics are twofold, encompassing a cognitive type of intervention, or an affective one. Whilst significant resistance is encountered in attempts of reconditioning thought processes (Gardiner 1972, Schaller et al. 1996) or attitudes (Kawakami et al. 2000, Stewart et al. 2010) and even turning detrimental (Kulik 2000) through encouraging thought awareness and inducing suppression of it (Blair 2002), there seem to be a higher degree of attainment in applying perspective-taking (Galinsky & Moskowitz 2000, Stephan & Finlay 1999) or cultivating empathy (Esses & Dovidio 2002,

Stephan & Finlay 1999).

It is the latter mode that best resonates with the primary ethnographic results of this paper. Visuals seem to serve such purpose by, after having facilitated conceptual intergroup contact, acting as conveyors of information that provide learning on the unknown context (Allport 1954), while lowering anxiety (Stephan & Stephan 1985) in connection with the same and consequently creating opportunities of empathy (Pettigrew & Tropp 2008, Stephan & Finlay 1999).

Visuals act as tools that allow us to infer reality from a different point of view. In fact, quintessential perception theory (Gregory, 1970, 1974) tells us that we conjecture the world surrounding us from our own personal angle. A purely objective world does not exist. Instead, each mind constructs a unique world according to what makes the most sense to an individual and following a pre-existing model of the world, constructed through idiosyncratic beliefs that are updated continuously by individual experience, paradoxically in that same world. If that is true, then with different experiences, it is possible also to remodel an existing model of the world, or at least partly. Ambiguous images provide this proof by signalling that reality is subjective, and the brain tests all different options, coming to conclusions through formulating its best guess and according to prior available accumulated gen. Subjective models of the world are constructed by distinctive perception. If so, then it is feasible to change a worldview, and the visual mean can be the catalyst for this mission. They can insert an external variable in the individual perception of the world and bring new information to include in the model of the world asset and by doing this allow to create a very new prototype of reality, since the latter is more a construction of the mind, as described by the Top-Down Theory (Gregory, 1970, 1974) rather than a recording of our senses, as in the Bottom-up Theory (Gibson, 1966, 1972). In other words, under this paradigm, and by introducing new data through experience, it is possible to modify perception by changing and so updating the version of reality.

At this stage, we could think of employing sources of senses other than the visual one, and that would make sense in the meaning of embracing the all perceptual system and possibilities within it. However, some evidence on the primacy and power of the visual perceptual channel makes us think again (McGurk & MacDonald 1976). Reality appears conspicuously as an illusion and virtual reality truly real as far as the human mind, as a container of the observer, is concerned. Latest pioneering approaches using technology expand on the visual tool with the experimental developments of virtual reality and are to be found in works carried out by some universities such as Stanford (Virtual Human Interaction

Lab 2015) and MIT (BeAnotherLab 2014).

Perspective-taking in general (Galinsky & Moskowitz 2000) and providing knowledge (Matusitz 2012) about the stereotyped group have both shown to be working towards the reduction of negative social stereotyping. Some research is stretching this concept to the application of virtual reality as an enhancer of perspective-taking to achieve similar results (Yee & Bailenson 2006). Further investigation, always in connection with virtual reality, finds the combination of added knowledge and perspective-taking to be even more effective than perspective-taking alone (Gehlbach et al. 2015). All these can only reinforce the concept of visual means holding a real potential for changes towards constructive perceptions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research recognises the potentiality of visual anthropology (el Guindi 2004, Engelbrecht 2007, Banks et al. 2011) as a bearer of an educational agency. It concludes on the positive contribution of visual media that holds an anthropological connotation, acting as a generator of empathy, in the merit of a provider of vicarious (Mazziotta et al. 2011) or parasocial intergroup contact (Schiappa et al. 2005) and promoting positive imagined exchange (Crisp & Turner 2009).

The researcher recommends the implementation of a significant visual asset of teaching resources able to transmit the realisation that different people are cultural options expressing meaning in a variety of frameworks and creating analogously valid visions of the world. Such perspectives can enlighten minds on the available ways of being to be selected and translated into sustainable modes of living. Such perception would allow for the shuttering of divisive orientations and make for an evolved approach contributing to the design of holistic paradigms orientated towards the integrity and the clear recognition of all radius of universal needs.

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