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Cultural identity and visual multiliteracy

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Abstract. *The framework of my article consists of broad definitions of visual culture and cultural identity. According to them, different micro cultures are represented in the products of material culture. I ask how constructive dialogue between different cultural groups can be built through studying works of art and other visuals. How can students' understanding of themselves and others be supported through the interpretation of visual culture using artistic production as its main tool? I start by presenting a model of multicultural identity and defining the concept of visual multiliteracy. The concept is then connected with research projects Experiential art understanding and Multiculturalism and integration. Visual multiliteracy in the context of interdisciplinary curriculum is discussed. Through integration, art teacher's professional identity changes from a teacher of skills to that of a cultural worker.*

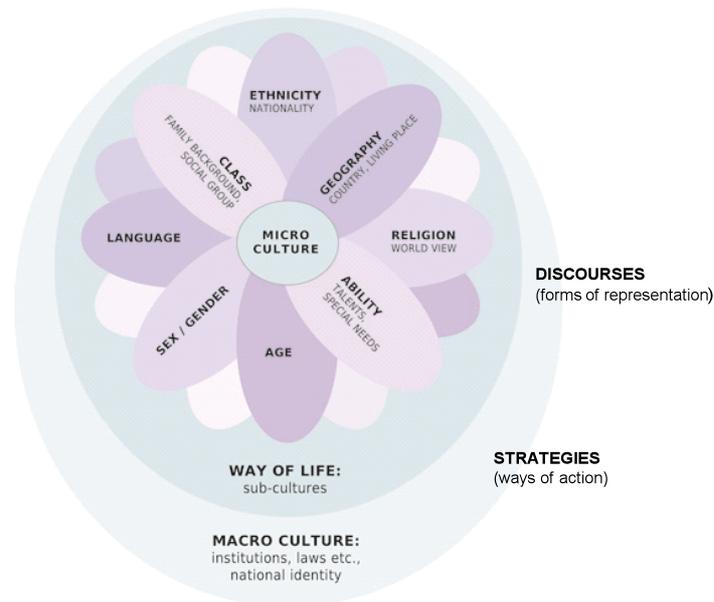
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Multicultural identity and art

Art makes us see ourselves and our relation to the world where we live. Art education helps to observe differences in human cultures and promotes an ethical attitude towards the unfamiliar. In order to understand other individuals and cultures, we have to have skills to interpret the art they make. Ways of making and experiencing art are always linked with broad cultural contexts. The artist's and the viewer's identities consist of personal and social dimensions which cannot be separated. Art education involves identity construction where students build bridges between these aspects. The factors affecting cultural identity can be illustrated by a flower in which the petals represent the micro cultures which together form a person's way of life (see Figure 1). They are

ethnicity, geography, religion, age, gender, language, class, and ability. (See Johnson, Musial et al. 2005 in Gollnick & Chinn 2009.) Each of them is involved in different ways of action and forms of representation.

Figure 1. The factors affecting cultural identity



In the flower of multicultural identity, an individual is seen as a member of several reference groups. Each person in a society belongs to a common macro culture consisting of the micro cultures represented by its members. Macro culture thus does not refer to the dominant culture but to the society that is formed in cooperation with various micro cultures. An individual's cultural identity keeps changing during the whole life time and so does the importance of different micro cultures. Religion and geographical background are commonly seen as primary micro cultures. In addition to or instead of them, people may be connected or separated for example by their socio-economic status. An outsider's definition of one's cultural identity may be totally different from one's own definition. The institutions and laws of each country set the constraints of the activities of an individual or a group. (Gollnick & Chinn 2009)

The goal of art education emphasizing multiculturalism is to create, study, and understand products that make the borderlines between mainstream cultures and micro

cultures visible and appreciated. The flower of multicultural identity helps a teacher to recognize the multiple dimensions of identity and possibilities to affect them. Seeing your own identity as a combination of constantly changing characteristics makes it also possible to face the “other” with an open mind. The multicultural flower approaches each student as different from another and claims that meetings between people always contain meetings between cultures. Its petals help us to see the subjectivity of similarities and differences and show that our cultural identities are both unique and situated. Seeing the views of your own community as only one possible truth makes it possible to accept other views as well. The flower also demonstrates that identities are open to multiple interpretations. Mediating this consciousness to students helps to stop the vicious circle of prejudices that they may have. Growing up to multiculturalism means getting free from ego- and ethno-centric attitudes towards the world. (See also Chalmers 1996.)

The flower of multicultural identity is based on the broad concept of culture including all those ways we use to create meanings, to communicate, and to organize our social lives. The identity consists of an individual’s relationship to cultural material. During his or her whole life, a human being keeps asking *Who am I? With whom and where do I live?* Answers to these questions are made up by constructing narratives that help us to define relationships with others and the world around us. A broad definition of the concept of narrative refers to all verbal, symbolic, or social expressions that a person uses to explain life to his or her self and others. Cultural identity is based on verbal, artistic, and other stories created in a certain time and place. Rituals, clothing, and images mediate traditions that connect an individual to a group. (See Geertz 1973, Hall 1997.) These visual narratives of self and others are studied in art lessons. By making and interpreting art, a student is studying and constructing his or her self and its relationships to culture.

In addition to narrativity, representation is a useful concept for understanding the relationship between the individual and culture. It is used to study how and from what perspective visuals build meanings and form our everyday lives and identities. Representation refers to all verbal and spoken language, visual presentations, and combinations of words and images. It means something that represents a thing, a person, an object, or a phenomenon. Representations are used to produce and mediate meanings between the members of a culture. In this mediation, language, signs, symbol systems, concrete pictures, and mental images are needed. During the interpretative process of visual culture, a spectator connects representations to the pictures typical of

the culture and to the pictures she or he has seen earlier, and to his or her mental images and views. (See Hall 1997, Mäkiranta 2010.)

Culture involves all products of human activities, such as works of art, also including ways of producing and interpreting these representations. Culture thus refers to a process where people are constructing and shaping material and spiritual meanings. Different verbal and nonverbal languages help us to share meanings and understand messages embedded in representations. Visual representations can be analyzed from mimetic, intentional, or constructivist perspectives. The idea of shared meanings is connected to constructionism which views production and interpretation as dependent on language and culture so that the maker, the spectator, and the researcher of the image are all situated. (See Hall 1997, Mäkiranta 2010.) Visual studies using multicultural identity as the framework are rooted in social-constructivist theories of education, being interested in how identities and reality are built through images. Analyzing artworks and other visual products opens up for a student the views and values of their own and other cultures.

Embedded in visual studies based on multicultural identity is the view of art as an open concept including changing views of art's purposes and tasks in society (see Weitz 1968 in Danto 1986). In picture analysis, this means leaning on contextual and pragmatist art theories (e.g. Shusterman 1992). Although postmodernity should not be seen as synonymous to multiculturalism, many art theories connected to it are relevant in building up a theoretical basis for visual studies emphasizing identity construction. According to postmodern theories of culture, art does not provide a single window to reality but it opens doors to various truths. Art is seen as a representation of a world which can be received in several ways based on the viewer's background and lifeworld. Art mediates personal and social meanings, building bridges between the cultures of the maker and the respondent. According to the postmodern view, contemporary art also blurs boundaries between "high" and "low" art so that different products of visual culture are seen as equal. Similarly, separation between different art forms disappears. (See Efland et al.1996.)

Multiliteracy and visual culture

I have developed a model aiming at visual multiliteracy that is based on broad definitions of cultural identity and visual culture. Many scholars use the concept of visual culture to refer to the images of contemporary global media instead of so called

traditional art. In my approach, the concept includes popular and fine art images of the past and the present. The contexts of making and interpreting visual culture are made for everyday use both in professional art and in visual products, also including the pictures students make at school and in their free time. In addition to the field of traditional art forms (paintings, sculptures etc.), visual multiliteracy deals with other visual products such as illustrations, tables, posters, propaganda, advertisements, tv-programs, movies, comics, cartoons, computer images, objects, and buildings (see Freedman 2003). My definition of visual multiliteracy is related to the concept of material culture arguing for a wide range of artifacts. In the study of material culture, everyday commonplace objects, forms, and expression are explored. The concept of material culture nicely fits in with the framework of the multicultural flower because people approach everyday images and objects from the perspective of their personal or cultural significance. (See Bolin and Blandy 2003.)

In the postmodern debate, the concept of “reading” keeps repeating. In the semioticians’ terms, reading means interpretation, decoding, and deciphering verbal and visual messages as texts. As a difference to earlier models of picture-analysis, the emphasis in interpretation is on “reader” instead of “writer”. (MacDonald 2006) The method was transferred from literature to the visual arts, and it has been popular among art educators ever since the 70’s. (See Räsänen 2008b.) Closely related to reading is the concept of literacy. Some scholars consider the concept problematic, because it refers to the semiotic reading of signs and symbols. This is seen as an attempt to force images into a structuralist analysis of literary texts, which tends to lead to narrow visual meanings. However, semiotics is not only about literary criticism, but it also seeks to define systems of communication other than verbal language. This is important in order to understand the multimodal nature of learning. The difference between, for instance, traditional aestheticians and semioticians is that the latter do not separate expressive and communicative acts but see them as cultural practices. Poststructuralist semiotics admits no closure in meaning making. (Addison 2006; see also Smith-Shank 2004.)

A range of literacies is at work in the current discourse on education. This involves encouraging diversity, which is consistent with the postmodern notion of grand and little narratives. The idea of several literacies is seen to promote a wider understanding of cultures. Visual literacy is a concept that grew out of the didacticism of the Fifties Basic Design in Britain and North America. Critical studies of visual culture that integrates multiculturalism and visual literacy could be organized under cultural literacy. From the cultural perspective, the work of art becomes a work of culture only when it has been reflected and shared. (MacDonald 2006) My definition of multiliteracy

is based on the recognition that visual culture consists of little narratives represented by the microcultures as described in the flower of multicultural identity. Crucial in my approach is that the stories embedded in artworks and other artifacts are analyzed through and represented in visual and verbal dialogues. This makes visual multiliteracy a part of cultural conversation.

My view on visual multiliteracy is also connected with the discussion of different languages. The concept of multiliteracy has been used to refer to multilingual people or to multiple versions of the English language. More recently, the concept has been separated from its cognitive and linguistic context, and it is understood as a social practice. According to social semiotics, literacy is not located solely in the head or in texts but in contexts. In a post-structural sense, the concept refers to multiple readings generated from multiple positions from which one views, reads, or hears. It also refers to the range of modalities that all cultural sites include. According to Duncum, there are no exclusively visual sites. He sees multimodality as central in multiliteracy, which to him means that all, especially contemporary visuals, appeal to multiple perceptual systems. Because of the “multisemiotic nature” of contemporary sites, the definition of multiliteracy that he employs requires interaction between several sign systems. Responding to messages including codes from different “languages” does not mean reading them separately but taking them as a whole, all at once. This is a challenge of multimodality for education. (Duncum 2004)

Contemporary art offers excellent tools to study the culture where we and students live. Many artworks, like almost all objects of present visual culture, are multimodal, also being rhizomatic in the sense that they relate to other visual and verbal texts. Relationships between “high” and “low” are of special interest in the intertextual study of visual culture. (See Duncum 2006.) However, the focus of my interpretative model aiming at visual multiliteracy is on the role of visuals in identity construction, taking place through contextualization of images. My approach promotes constructive dialogue between different cultural and social groups through making and interpreting art. Reading images happens through studying the maker’s and the responder’s multicultural identities. Its main goal is to study how students’ micro cultures and ways of life affect and change the macro culture. This goal is based on the view that arts are about cultural production: they contribute to the making and remaking of culture.

In visual multiliteracy, products of material culture are studied employing methodologies of several disciplines. In addition to methods of traditional art disciplines like art history and aesthetics, approaches from cultural studies are applied (e.g.

Buckingham & Safton-Green 1994). A visual product under study is approached from several perspectives, and different models of picture analysis are used. Meaning giving is based on visual production so that verbal and visual investigations are intertwined. In the process of interpretation, the wider anthropological concept of culture is united with the aesthetic definition. (See Dissanayake 1988, Duncum 2001.) Similarly to the artist, students can be considered visual ethnographers in their art making and interpretation. Ethnographic methods combined with the study of visual culture can help us connect artistic practice with cultural knowledge and narratives. (See Desai 2002.) In visual culture studies, the objects of interpretation may be chosen among those which are important to representatives of a certain culture. The exploration of images may broaden into a more extensive ethnographic study where visual methods are used. In the research context, multiliteracy includes skills in analyzing both verbal and visual data collected, thus connecting art to other forms of knowledge.

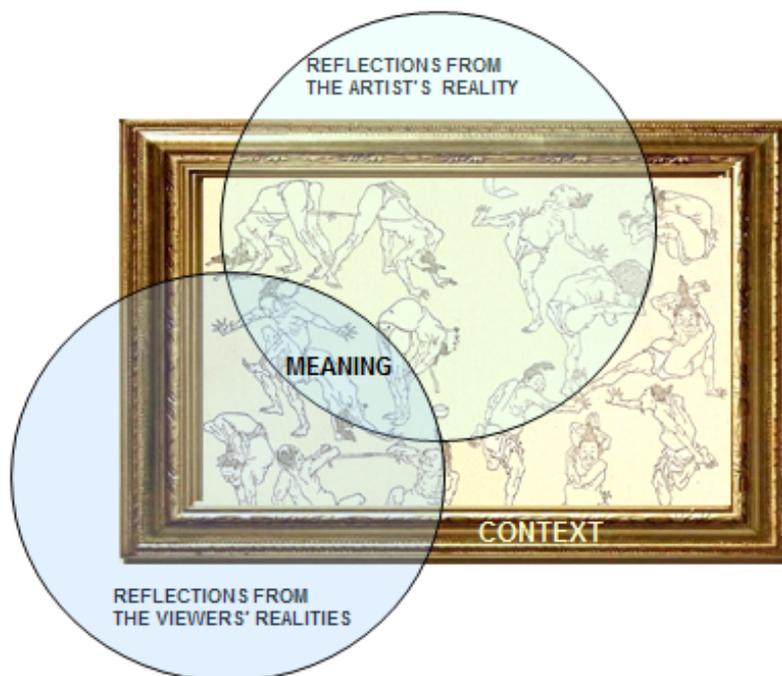
Art understanding as a means of constructing multicultural selves

The basis of my work on visual literacy is to be found in my dissertation study (Räsänen 1997) where I developed and experimented on an experiential-constructivist model for art understanding. In the case study that was part of my thesis, 16-year-old high school students interpreted a single work of art in a course of 38 hours, connecting it with other artworks and visual material through writing, discussion, and art-making. According to the model of experiential art understanding, art experience comes into being when the cultural identities of the maker and the receiver meet as the work of art is explored. Artwork is seen as a bridge between the cultures of the artist and the viewer. The bridge is built through the contextualization of the image, the maker, and the respondent. The process of interpretation is loosely based on the four fields included in discipline-based art education (aesthetics, criticism, art history, studio), however applying postmodern methods within them and using art making as the main tool of analysis. (Räsänen 1997, 1999, 2003)

My model of art understanding has its roots in David Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984), and it has three overlapping phases, each of them emphasizing art-making. The interpretative process starts from a sensuous response to the key-work and it is based on the viewers' personal experiences. At the level of contextualization, the biography and culture of the maker are studied. The process culminates in production as the students make their own appropriations based on the artwork explored. They are asking how the work is connected to their own lives. The meanings of the image are

searched from various sources. During the process of interpretation, models of picture analysis based on the perspectives of image, maker, receiver, and context are integrated. The main goal of the study is to understand how the multicultural self of the artist affects the image, and how the personal and social identities of the viewers affect the way they respond to the image. Students are asking *Why do I respond to this work of art in this way?* Answers to this question are found in their prior knowledge and experiences, mood, context of viewing, and from various aspects of their cultural identities. Through sharing and art-making, students build a bridge between their lifeworlds and artworlds so that the understanding of art is united with self-construction. The students' life values and views of art are emphasized so that the interpretation and judgment are intertwined with self understanding.

Figure 2. The meeting of realities in the process of meaning-making



Using the model of experiential art understanding, a multimodal course based on Internet dialogue between two or more teacher training universities was developed in 2006. The focus of the interpretation in class is in multicultural aspects of visual culture. (Räsänen 2008a) The process is organized around the three “realities” affecting meaning-making (see Figure 2), and it consist of nine key questions. They are: 1) What is my immediate experience – can I associate the artwork to my life? 2) What kind of knowledge about the artwork do I get through the different senses? 3) What do the

details in the artwork tell about the cultures of the artist and myself as a viewer? 4) What does reading the artwork through verbal and visual texts tell about the meanings embedded in the image and its response? 5) What new understanding does the artist's biography add to the artwork and to my own life? 6) How do the artist's and my cultural identities affect the image and its response? 7) How does meeting the original in the museum contribute to my meaning-making? 8) Is this a good work of art – why? 9) What does the image mean to me – how can I connect it to my life through visual production?

The core of my approach in analyzing artworks and other products of visual culture is in production. Considering studio work as central in art educational practices is not very novel, but serious studies of art as a form of thinking are still not common (e.g. Walker 2001, Hetland et al. 2007). Different studio practices are also used under the rubric of visual culture. Students are often asked to analyze popular culture using conventional art forms like painting. Occasionally, studies of visual culture also employ contemporary media. This, however, may easily turn into parody if students are not given proper instruction. In these approaches, making is seen to provide an insider's perspective on artist's work. Students may also study an artist working on popular culture and then apply the observed creative process in their own work. If students are not researching issues the way the artists do they are only mimicking the technique. A false form of student-centrism is to ask the students to include a favorite item of popular culture in their work. Similarly, encouraging them to tell personal stories between people and artifacts emphasizes subjectivity over cultural meanings. Applying intertextual methods using the World Wide Web may promote positive student-centrism but there is a risk that the Internet is used in a superficial way. (See Duncum 2006.)

The pedagogies described above are close to the forms of appropriation I have identified in the process of experiential art interpretation (Räsänen 1997). They are emphasized particularly at the end of the analysis. The main idea of visual multiliteracy is to connect the image with the student's lifeworld through productive activities, and to compare the cultures of the maker and the responder. In my web-based course of art understanding, multiliteracy is connected to cultural identity, and it is approached from two perspectives. Social identity is studied using art history and the iconological method. The artwork is linked to cultural studies through intertextuality. Personal identity is central when making appropriations based on the whole process of meaning-making. In the same way as in the approaches typical of visual culture studies, layered over each interpretative phase students are asking questions drawn from aesthetics, semiotics,

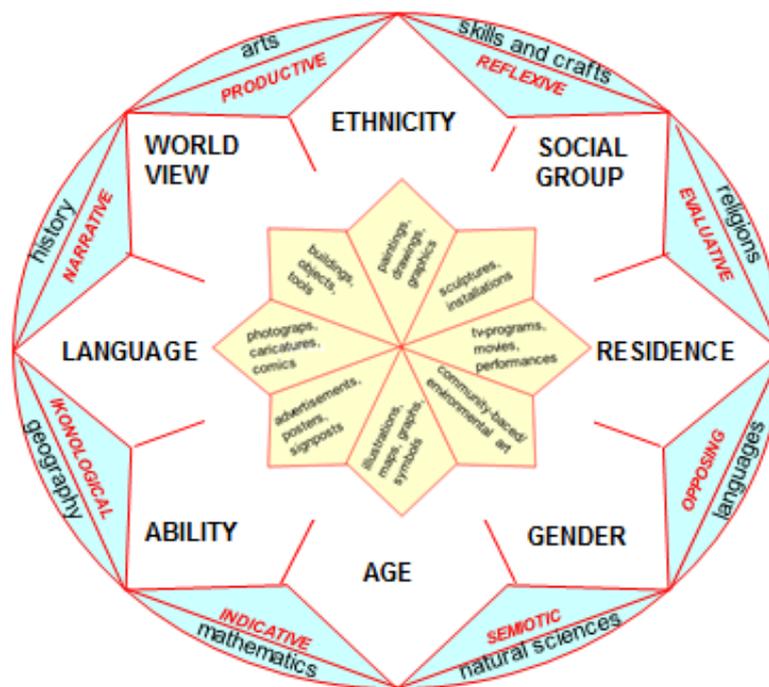
cultural theory etc. As part of the process of contextualization, students are working as ethnographers by interviewing artists or undertaking opinion surveys.

Multiliteracy and integration

In my current research project, I explore how class teacher students' conceptions of multiculturalism and visual literacy, and the role of art in their professional identity are developed during their five study years. In the project, art is considered to contribute to school's main task that I consider cultural education. Different models of visual reading are related to approaches of multicultural education. As most of them aim either at adaptation, communion, or equality, the goal of visual multiliteracy as part of multicultural art education is change. (See Räsänen 2008a, Efland et al. 1996.) Multiliteracy involves an ability to perceive, interpret, understand, and appreciate visual messages of other cultural groups, and skills to produce visual messages based on one's own cultural identity. In addition to communication and interaction, visual multiliteracy promotes personal, professional, and social development.

The main concepts of the research are multiliteracy and multidisciplinary. In my study, future class teachers ask following questions: *How are different cultural groups and fields of cultural identity represented in visual culture? How is multiculturalism referred to in the curricula of different school subjects? What kinds of images can be used in teaching them?* Students are encouraged to plan teaching units where images are used as sources for learning in all school subjects. In their planning, students use the five main principles of visual multiliteracy in studying material culture. They are: 1) Multiliteracy is rooted in contextualization, which involves the study of maker's and responder's multicultural identities. 2) The process of study is based on art disciplines emphasizing cultural studies. 3) During the interpretation, different approaches of picture analysis are used. 4) Art-making has a central role in the interpretative process. 5) Visual symbolization is related to other forms of conceptualization used in school subjects.

Figure 3. Multiliteracy through integration



In the research project, students are asked to approach different aspects of cultural identity through images (see Figure 3). Fields of visual culture are studied in the contexts of different school subjects using diverse ways of reading (e.g. Werner 2002). The goal of the project is integration on two levels. The students link together content areas of the art curriculum and connect them with cross-curricular themes so that interdisciplinary learning is promoted. The starting point of integration is in the issues mediated by works of art and other products of material culture.

Data analysis of the first phase of the study consisting of unit plans made by first year students (N=70) has given useful information for further developing my approach. The results show that my first intervention, one hour lecture on visual multiliteracy; only helped students to use the basic level of the model, i.e. classification of themes and images based on the dimensions of cultural identity. Guided by the assignment form, students were supposed to apply all aspects of the model but most of them still used ethnicity, geography, and worldview as their main categories rejecting age, gender, ability, and social class. Dimensions of the multicultural flower were understood as

characterizations of different groups, not as attributes of individuals referring to human diversity. Only in four plans two of the dimensions were overlapping.

Very few students could broaden their concept of multiculturalism and include new factors of it in their plans. In addition to the narrow view of cultural identity, students' ability to use different products of visual culture was limited mostly on documentary photographs and paintings. Their skills in applying methods of visual interpretation, especially the way to use productive reading through art making, was very modest. Students' understanding of interdisciplinary investigation was also superficial. The results are not a surprise to me, and connected to the survey I have made of the beginning students' overall conceptions of multiculturalism and of their school-time memories of multicultural art education, the research shows what a challenge multicultural, integrative visual culture education for class teachers is. I hope my follow-up study with its yearly interventions will contribute new practices in this complex and demanding field.

Art educators as culture workers

What does visual multiliteracy that is based on interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism mean to the practices of art education? My suggestion is that the role of the cultural worker should be added to the multiple roles of an art teacher as educator, artist, and researcher. (Räsänen 2005, 2008b) To me the overall task of a multiroled art teacher is to develop multicultural understanding through literacy of visual culture. The professional identity of an art educator thus changes from a teacher of skills to that of a cultural worker capable of participating in interdisciplinary cooperation. In this work, the flower of cultural identity is useful. The flower opens up a dialogue between the renaissance ideal of a holistic human being and the idea of postmodern identity. I see wholeness as a constant construction of multicultural identity. To me the piece missing from the puzzle based on the renaissance *uomo universale* illustrated by Leonardo (see Image 1) does not represent something that is lacking but something that is in construction. The appropriation also poses the question of relationship between art and science already discussed in da Vinci's time.

The role of art in a holistic educational system is based on the special nature of knowing what it represents. According to current cognitive theories, learning happens through all sensory fields and includes various ways of knowing. All knowing involves processes of selection, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis. These characteristics of ordering and

making sense are typical of both art and science. In the same way as sensations and experiences are ordered through the perceptual systems and the mind, material is organized into a system of visual signs in artworks. This kind of knowledge is embodied in all products of visual culture. In addition to the sensory information that images convey, they are also representations of subjective human experience. Knowledge acquired through reflection about what it is to be a certain person in a certain culture encompasses psychological, existential, and spiritual domains of knowledge. (Danvers 2006)

Cognitive theorists advocate a view of learning where different conceptions of knowledge are seen as complementary. They see that every school subject is based on expert knowledge of the discipline it represents. There are properties common to art and other subjects, but art also makes a unique contribution to cognition as a whole. (Efland 2002, Eisner 2002) Thinking and communicating are based on multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983). They are domain specific and bound to particular forms of expression. Verbal, numerical, and visual or other artistic ways of thinking are equal but separate ways of knowing. Transferring thought from one form to another always means distortion. (Arnheim 1969, Goodman 1976) For example, the visual cannot be reduced to the verbal, and visual language can be seen as a relatively autonomous semiotic mode. (See Duncum 2004.)

Image 1. The logo of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Oulu designed by Juha Tuhkanen.



Like in other school subjects, conceptualization and theorizing are learnt in art. Art deals with theoretical issues by generalizing through specific cases, and by connecting an individual to culture. Works of art can be understood as artists' theories about reality. Art products consist of culturally based symbols that represent artistic conceptualization. As conceptual thinking in general is considered to take place through abstract symbols, such as numbers and letters, images are constructed using visual symbols like colors. Art offers a unique language equal to other symbolic forms. It is nonlinear, nonverbal, and metaphoric. What makes artistic conceptualization so special is that in art abstract thinking is not separated from action.

For a holistic school culture and worldview, symbol systems embedded in different disciplines should be considered as equal. Students should learn to study, conceptualize, and express their cultures through the forms of symbolization included in each school subject. The idea that all ways of knowing are unique also means that integration should be based on independent school subjects. Interdisciplinary thus does not mean messy theme days but requires cooperation between experts who acknowledge each other's specialization. The challenge of art educators and researchers is also to introduce ways of knowing based on artistic conceptualization and action to other school subjects. Artistry as a broad concept deals with students' need to learn in a way in which senses, emotions, concepts, and actions are intertwined. Every school subject should involve head, body, and heart.

School is part of culture and its subjects represent different fields of culture. The main task of education is to give students tools to understand and construct their own lives and themselves as representatives of different cultures. The source of learning should thus be in the students' lifeworlds and cultural phenomena embedded in them. A broad definition of culture does not separate arts from other forms of meaning making and communication. Art is a form of knowing where knowledge is bound to its cultural context. The core of the kind of multiliteracy that I am advocating is to study images as cultural signs posting something about ways of life. Among other languages, learning to read the visual language of cultural products is fundamental to each student. Visual multiliteracy as part of cultural literacy means breaking up hierarchies between science, art, and different cultural practices. Art offers the school a cultural chiasm, a place where different disciplines are crossing. Art helps to recognize and bring into discussion different personal and cultural issues. Culture goes through all aspects of art and makes art educators cultural workers.

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