

Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak

Uniwersytet Szczeciński

LEARNING THE WORLD THROUGH READING SIGNS AND IMAGES; EMANCIPATORY PERSPECTIVE¹

Abstract

This text deals with the problem of visual literacy as an immanent multimodality of lifelong learning. The key issue, taken in the article, focuses on a narrow section of the subject matter of visual literacy, namely its importance in the process of individual and collective emancipation, implementation of the principles of social justice and respect for human rights. As an important condition for achieving that aim is the respect of validity claims in communication within the meaning of Jürgen Habermas.

Key words: visual literacy, emancipation, lifelong learning, visual communication, validity claims.

UCZENIE SIĘ ŚWIATA POPRZEZ CZYTANIE ZNAKÓW I OBRAZÓW; PERSPEKTYWA EMANCYPACYJNA

Streszczenie

W tekście podjęta jest problematyka alfabetyzacji wizualnej jako immanentnej wielomodalności uczenia się przez całe życie. Kluczowa kwestia podjęta w artykule koncentruje się na wąskiej części problematyki tej postaci alfabetyzacji, a mianowicie na jej znaczeniu w procesie emancypacji indywidualnej i zbiorowej, wdrażaniu zasad sprawiedliwości społecznej i poszanowania praw człowieka. Ważnym warunkiem osiągnięcia tego celu jest poszanowanie roszczeń dotyczących ważności w komunikacji w rozumieniu Jürgena Habermasa.

Słowa kluczowe: alfabetyzacja wizualna, emancypacja, edukacja całościowa, komunikacja wizualna, roszczenia ważności.

Introduction

Nobody today doubts that education is a key factor in individual satisfaction and collective well-being. This truism helps to understand why formal education is focused on three „R” - Reading-wRiting-aRythmetic. Universal literacy is focused mainly on the skills of reading and

¹ This text is a part of research project TICASS (MSCA-H2020-RISE, No 734602).

writing words describing our worlds of life. It is the foundation and means of liberation, the emancipation of the subject to exercise the rights and fields of freedom. Numerous works (not only written by educationists) prove its importance. Thus, literacy is, without doubt, one of the most important social and political challenges. This is the fundament of respect of human rights, freedom and justice.

At the same time less attention in institutional education devotes to reading signs and images that fill the everyday space of human existence. Images and signs accompany people „from the beginning”, both in philo- and ontogenetic perspective. Images and signs are earlier information than letters. Their reading and understanding is the condition of a sense of individual and collective security. Some of them inform about the situation in which we find ourselves, help us make appropriate, adequate decisions and behaviors. Others warn of danger, arouse vigilance and caution, and even prohibit certain activities. There are also those that prescribe a certain behavior. They are all carriers of specific contents, ethical values, aesthetics, etc, as well as instructions. These signs fill with private and public spaces, are present in personal and professional activities. Their cognition and understanding, which is the basis of conscious participation in culture, take place mainly in the process of socialization. Less attention in institutional education is given to visual literacy, to skills of reading signs and images.

In this text I focus on a narrow section of the issue of visual literacy, namely its importance in the process of individual and collective emancipation, implementation of the principles of social justice and respect for human rights, as well as its role in the process vocational education and performing professional activities. I am arguing that visual literacy is an inseparable element of professional skills and efficiency in every profession, in the performance of every profession.

On the beginning, I present the concept of visual literacy on the ground of emancipation pedagogy. Against this background, I discuss the claims of validity in the context of visual communication according to the meaning of J. Habermas. In the end I am writing about critical visual literacy in the context of lifelong education, both in terms of professional updating and responsible participation in a democratic social order.

1. Visual literacy in the perspective of emancipation pedagogy

In spite of well-argued knowledge and broad practices, that the role of literacy in the liberation of man and the collective for self-determination and achieving autonomy in particular dimensions of life is undeniable (as evidenced by the numerous works of critical educators with Paulo Freire and his followers), the concept of literacy is not as unambiguous as it might be seem at the first glance. First of all, literacy has no single or universal definition and its meaning has changed over time from an elementary ‘decoding’ of written information to a range of more complex and diverse skills and understandings. According to Michele Lonsdale and Doug McCurry: „Literacy has been defined in many different, sometimes contradictory, ways. Some

definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work, education, social interaction and negotiation of everyday living. Others have a more social focus, and include the literacies for specific contexts and those which empower particular communities enabling them to challenge the status quo². Thus, how literacy is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted.

It can be clearly seen on the following meanings:

- „a set of functional skills that help people to meet the demands that society puts on them, especially in terms of employment,
- a civilizing tool, allowing people to access a literary culture that is part of their cultural heritage,
- a means of emancipation, enabling people to control their lives, challenge injustice and become autonomous, participating citizens in a democracy³.

Need to stress, that understanding and defining of literacy is in permanent dialectical relations to the profound economic, social, political, economic and cultural change. In that perspective relations between literacy and personal and common emancipation are the most important and interesting. That's why the iconic information and visual stimuli in the contemporary lifeworld means so much for education, and are objects of the critical reflection as well as challenges for theory and practice.

Much more problems are arousing when we try to define visual literacy. And the need for such a definition is undeniable. We live in the world of signs and images, and even in iconical culture. One can see the static, as well as dynamic means of visual communication. Peter Felten writes about the end of the text's and word's culture and about the pictorial turn in contemporary communication. According to him, „the new «pictorial turn» means that images no longer exist primarily to entertain and illustrate. Rather they are becoming central to communication and meaning-making⁴. Thus, visual literacy can be understand as the subject's skill both of reading and interpreting signs and images, both present and from the past.

The concept and term of „visual literacy” we owe to John Debes, who introduced it in 1969. He formulated the following definition of this concept: „Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication⁵.

² M. Lonsdale, D. McCurry, *Literacy in the New Millennium*, NCVER, Adelaide 2004, s. 5.

³ M. Hamilton, *The Social Context of Literacy*, [in:] N. Hughes and I Schwab (eds) *Teaching Adult Literacy: principles and practice* (Developing Adult Skills) Open University Press, Milton Keynes 2010, s. 8.

⁴ P. Felten, *Visual Literacy*, „Change. The Magazine of Higher Learning”, 2008, Vol 40, No 6.

⁵ J. Debes, *What is visual literacy?*, <http://visualliteracytoday.org/what-is-visual-literacy/> [30.01.2018].

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary the term of visual literacy is defined as the ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images (such as pictures, photos, graffiti, as well as tables, charts, drawings and figures)⁶. As Peter Felten states: „literacy involves the ability to understand, produce, and use culturally significant images, objects, and visible actions. With training and practice, people can develop the ability to recognize, interpret, and employ the distinct syntax and semantics of different visual forms. The process of becoming visually literate continues through a lifetime of learning new and more sophisticated ways to analyze and use images⁷. Visual literacy therefore can help achieve two major objectives, namely: a) helping people learn to read or decode visual information and b) helping people write or create visuals to convey information. This is very important aim of formal as well as extra formal education.

The meanings of material signs (and its production) as well as symbolic signs are seeing, reading and understanding as need to be obeyed, because of their more powerful dense and coherent. The dominant ideology functions to incorporate the people to the system and penetrates and infects the consciousness of people, because of people come to see and experience reality through the lenses, conceptual categories of dominant ideology. Almost every message in the public sphere is created for a specific reason, with the same purpose in the mind and with the some more or less concrete intention to generate of human action. There is then, the surface appearance or denotative meaning of the image, but there are also deeper, sometimes hidden connotations there as well. So, one should stress, that visual literacy is a key goal for education, especially: seeing and understanding differences between literal and symbolic meanings. It is just one of the main reason why the critical visual literacy and communicative competence is so important in the free, democratic society.

2. Visual literacy as an agent of empowerment and emancipation

Visual imagery is never innocent; is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledge. As every educational action, teaching and learning of visual literacy as well as communicative competences may to lead to different results. It depends on aims of teachers/educators and the dominating ideology which organizes of social order. Orientation on obedience and on conserve of existing order generates teaching and learning of visual communication as a reproduction of meanings and disciplined observance of them. Critical visual literacy, which can be understand as a dialectical link between ability and skills of reading and creating symbols, signs and images and emancipator reflection need to fulfill the claims of communicative rationality formulated by Jürgen Habermas.

According to Christian Fuchs: „One cannot talk about critical theory (and as I need to add: about emancipation) without talking about Habermas. When bringing up the notion of

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/visual%20literacy>, [30.01.2018].

⁷ P. Felten, *Visual Literacy*, *op. cit.*

a critical theory of communication, most readers will inevitably first and foremost think of Habermas. (...). Updating critical theory and communication theory therefore requires a substantial engagement with Habermas' works. There are many virtues of Habermas, not least that he is a true public intellectual who has intervened in everyday political debates"⁸.

In the context of elucidating the concept of visual literacy as a condition of critical communication one can use the Habermasian category of validity claims. According to the author the aim of the rational communication is reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust and accord with one another. The fundament is the recognition of validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness. Although Habermas addresses his theory of communication mainly to words, it applies also to visual communication. Signs and images, to be credible and to lead by understanding to agreement, must fulfill the mentioned claims of validity.

Thus elements of visual language need to be seen as an immanent part of social communication and as that, to perform the same functions as the other speech acts distinguished by Habermas, namely:

- description, informing, explaining, it means, representing the state of affairs in the system of the external world,
- expression of expectations and hopes, i.e. representing the subjectivity of actors of interaction and
- promises and warnings, that is, presenting norms regulating the social order.

Knowing their meanings: orders, bans, instructions and information, as well as understanding criteria of inclusion, exclusion and inclusion and accept its or refuse, reject it, is the base of Subject's action. The choice of reaction depends on critical judgment of situation, namely judgment of communicates from points of view the equality, social justice and borders of freedom. In other words, functioning in the public sphere requires of Subjective emancipatory competences: the synthesis of critical rationality, innovative thinking and civil courage. These intellectual, emotional and behavioral features of Subject are the foundation of critical reading of images – messages and responsible acting in the everyday lifeworld, which is filled by all sort of information.

From the point of view of social order the most important is respect by communication in the public sphere of moral rightness, ethical goodness or authenticity, personal sincerity, and aesthetic value. And the same is the condition for the proper visual information, both in the private and public sphere as well as in professional. Many places of the work, as well as many tasks in every day professional activity are full of visual communicates. Critical reading and responsible follow them are the condition of individual and common safety.

⁸Ch. Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*, University of Westminster Press, London 2016, s. 25.

Conclusion

Living in the contemporary reality demands of understanding the meaning of signs and images. In communication gestures, images and proxemic location are much more informative than words. Signs, pictures, images, both natural and artificial, made by the man in the special purpose, formal and informal are as much old as our civilization, theirs dynamic and repertory are bigger and bigger. It generates necessity to take the visual communication as special object of educational research.

According to the common knowledge, most people don't read instructions how to use new devices. What is worse, they even don't read how to use the professional tools. Taking into consideration the frequency of changing these devices and develop of means and forms of communication, especially the broad spectrum iconic signs one can see challenges for general and vocational education. That's why reading images become important skill for keep up with developments in technology which so dramatically transformed the world. Socialization and self-learning are not enough to cope with these challenges. People need education which definitely goes far away beyond the time and school's walls. Thus, visual literacy become complementary aim and task of education, both in formal and informal. It becomes an important part of lifelong learning, both in terms of professional updating and responsible participation in a democratic social order.

For people living in an images-rich world, visual literacy involves the ability to understand, produce, and use culturally significant images, objects, and visible on them actions. In the rapidly changing world, visual literacy, whether conceptualized as a distinct set of capacities or as part of a larger multimodal literacy, becomes the fundamental goals of education for empowerment of subject and for democracy.

In the end I wrote about critical visual literacy in the context of lifelong education, both in terms of professional updating and responsible participation in a democratic social order.

Bibliography

- American Dictionary *Merriam-Webster Unabridged*, Britannica Digital Learning, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/visual%20literacy>, [30.01.2018].
- Debes J., *What is visual literacy?*, <http://visualliteracytoday.org/what-is-visual-literacy/> [30.01.2018].
- Felten P., *Visual Literacy*, „Change. The Magazine of Higher Learning”, 2008, Vol 40, No 6.
- Fuchs Ch., *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*, University of Westminster Press, London 2016.
- Hamilton M., *The Social Context of Literacy*, [in:] N. Hughes and I. Schwab (eds) *Teaching Adult Literacy: principles and practice* (Developing Adult Skills), Open University Press, Milton Keynes 2010.
- Lonsdale M., McCurry D., *Literacy in the New Millennium*, NCVER, Adelaide 2004.