

Visual Communication Strategies, Skills and Reflections for the Twenty-First-Century BA — Working Group in Favour of a Renewed and More Intensive Emphasis on Visual Studies, Observational Training, and Analytical Skills

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The Associate Dean Mickey Adolphson has asked for contributions in addressing the following questions: Do students acquire enough and the right kind of knowledge and skills to be successful post-graduation? Are there ways in which we could make our BA more distinctive in Canada and North America? How do we use, stay on top of and address the challenges of instructional technologies? What requirements would be essential to an Arts degree at the U of A in the near future?

Background and Rationale:

Our students live in an increasingly visual world, surrounded by written texts and images as they engage with various kinds of social media, popular culture, and the spaces formed in relation to architectural and design elements. Like many of us, these students spend significant parts of their days absorbing, decoding, responding to and creating visual messages. In addition to interacting with screens, students communicate visually through, for example, their selection and arrangement of home furnishings, fashion choices, and the ways in which they shape their bodies by means of exercise or such decoration as tattoos. Yet even as students are inundated with, immersed in, and embody visual modes of communication, most have not been provided the tools and sensitivity required to be able to engage critically with that communication.

It is the contention of this BA Working Group that all students will benefit from an awareness of the complexity of this visual realm. An innovative, flexible and useful BA degree should equip students with a range of historical, critical, and practical approaches enabling them to analyze, assess, synthesize, resist, and reshape visual images, objects and concepts. Such a sophisticated understanding of visualities, both past and present, will encourage students to become effective citizens, while supporting their productive pursuits in any number of fields, including science, commerce, biomedicine, and the arts, all of which rely heavily on visual means of creating and conveying information. Though the importance of writing skills in these domains has long been recognized in university settings, including at the University of Alberta, the equally crucial analytical abilities required to interpret and convey visual meanings are not yet embraced in an official and overt fashion by our institution.

Students sometimes assume that all images are based on the principle of likeness, and that any number of imaging technologies (film, photography, microscopy,

economic graphs, scientific diagrams) are meant to reflect or reproduce the world as it is. They thus tend to judge the results in terms of accuracy or lack thereof. Yet images—and the written texts with which they continually intersect—actively shape and produce knowledge, conveying layers of meaning from different historical and cultural locations, by means of a wide range of signifying mechanisms. Students trained in visual literacy will be able to identify these mechanisms, determine the historical or cultural constructions on which they rely, and recognize the innovative features of new visual productions. When equipped with visual skills and training, students will be able to, for example, distinguish the ways in which street signs convey meanings from those that inform digital photographs. They will be able to consider the history of medical technologies like Magnetic Resonance Imaging, noting how they both draw and diverge from the ways of representing the human body developed during the Renaissance. They will recognize the impact of design principles on their everyday lives, applying these interpretive abilities to their experiences of film, photography, geographical landscapes, video making, and any number of other endeavours. They will come to consider the role that national or cultural communities and expectations affect image making and interpretation. They will think about the technologies used for the circulation of visual cultures and their impact on reception and interpretation. They will be aware of the meanings produced in their repeated encounters with modes of bodily display, and the shifting power dynamics of the acts of looking and being looked at. In short, students will be adept at visual thinking and knowing, and thus capable of analyzing, synthesizing, decoding, subverting, and expanding the visual realm with which they are in constant contact.

Delivery:

A. August Course

This kind of visual knowledge is best taught by combining an interdisciplinary approach with hands-on experiences. Pedagogical methods should simultaneously hone students' observational skills in specific settings, and be open enough to address the broad scope of students' interests and future plans.

This Working Group recommends that the University of Alberta considers creating a new course model, to be delivered to all first-year students during the month of August, before the regular semester begins.¹ This required but ungraded (pass/fail) one- or two-week long course would accomplish many goals. Firstly it would immediately engage students in learning observational and other visual skills, allowing them access to tools and skills that need to be experienced directly, such as video making or drawing classes. In this pre-BA course, students would be free to experiment, to try things out, in a creative manner that would support any direction they subsequently decided to follow—either by specializing in the BA format as it is currently constructed, or by choosing to specialize in a new Visual and Media Studies BA, as outlined below. Secondly, this course would allow first-year students

to form a cohort, identifying with each other and with the spaces of and opportunities at the University of Alberta and Edmonton, before the arrival of most of the senior students. This August course would thereby assist in preparing students to make the most of university life, enhancing their experience as well as their subsequent retention. Students would learn skills and produce visual projects based on local circumstances, perhaps by exploring the design elements that shape the city of Edmonton, considering the representation of mountain culture, or working with local archives and art galleries. Thirdly, students would meet with the various professors and graduate students who serve as guides and mentors in this August course, making them more comfortable with university life and more aware of its structure. The inclusion of diverse kinds of instructors working together in the delivery of this course would clearly benefit graduate students, providing them with pedagogical training and increased opportunities to gain funding for their educations. This course would not be taught as an extra-load for professors, nor would it replace the more specialized introductory courses offered by specific departments (such as the oversubscribed Fine Arts Fundamentals courses), and would thereby encourage innovative and creative thinking from a human resources management perspective. Fourthly, this August course would contribute to the University of Alberta's longstanding commitment to community outreach by including those learners who have historically been excluded from university settings. It would allow mature or marginalized learners to "try out" the university experience in a safe and welcoming way, extending such programs as Humanities 101 among others. An August course featuring visual literacies would furthermore link with community more broadly, by drawing on the unique identity and situation of Edmonton in the construction of course contents. Students would be invited to compare and contrast the visualities within Edmonton with those found in other places, inviting an ongoing dialogue.

Sample Exercises:

1) Drawing and Perception: the project would revolve around a very simple drawing exercise such as a blind contour drawing, negative space drawing or a simple line contour drawing of a small object. Students would be asked to work in a relatively small scale so that these exercises could occur in larger group settings. The exercise could be linked to other issues/questions around perception with a particular emphasis around the idea that what we "think" we see is often very different from what we are actually perceiving. It would usefully introduce some of the basic principles of studio practice.

2) Text and Image Collage: students would be given a random word and then be asked to pair it with an appropriated image by means of a collage process, using simple cut and paste or photocopy methods. The idea would be to ask students to see if they could challenge or change the "meaning" of the word by bringing it into a new context in which an unexpected or poetic relationship is developed between text and image. Artists such as Barbara Kruger, Ed Rusche, Andy Warhol and Sigmar Polke would be introduced for discussion. More broadly, the project would also

provide a way to discuss semiotics, language/text usage in both art and popular culture, and questions about appropriation in artistic practice.

3) Form as Content: students would be asked to select a piece of music or poem and consider the ways in which its structure (rather than its subject matter) imparts meaning. Using this source material for inspiration, students would then be asked to make a non-representational collage in order to create an experience for viewers that would parallel the piece they had selected. Other artistic examples and movements, including the Japanese concept of “ma,” would provide context, allowing students to consider how formal strategies can not only evoke unique responses in individual works of art but, also reflect larger philosophical, religious or political ideas.

4) Past and Present: students would be encouraged to find references to Renaissance art and design in such forms of popular culture as fashion magazines as well as in architectural settings. They would then be guided to consider how the meanings originally attached to these historical images and design features have been both maintained and altered in our contemporary culture. Issues of artistic intention, shifting sites of meaning, and diverse audiences would be explored in this exercise.

B. New Visual and Media Studies BA

Although the August course would be required for all incoming students, a number of them would also have the option of exploring visual studies during the course of their BA. This new BA would require neither a new structure nor the development of new courses. It would draw on and reconfigure the manifold courses that highlight visual culture and its analysis and creation already in place in various departments across the University of Alberta. Participating departments would include, but not be limited to, the following: English and Film Studies (for courses on film, popular culture and such print media as comic books), Art and Design (for studio courses in drawing, printmaking, and photography, as well as courses in the history of art, including the visual culture of medicine and images from popular culture, both historical and contemporary), Anthropology (for courses in the anthropology of art and the material culture of different cultural groups), Modern Languages and Cultural Studies (for courses in the visual and media culture of Germany and other featured countries), Women’s Studies (for courses on the representation of girls and women, gendered imagery in popular culture, and feminist avant-garde film). This exciting new BA would bring to light the many areas of visual specialization already on offer at the University of Alberta, drawing links between departments and faculty members, and attracting a potentially diverse array of inspired applicants.

¹ For the differently constituted and highly successful August course model instituted at Bard College, see <http://languageandthinking.bard.edu/about/>