

Visual communication bridging intercultural barriers

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Introduction

The increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees over the last decade has been one of the challenges for our society. Barriers to integration are exacerbated by xenophobia and stereotypes against foreigners, thus creating conflicts between members of the host society and newcomers. Refugee youth arriving in Hungary face serious problems: the loss of home and community, the traumas suffered during the journey, the cultural differences, and the lack of a common language all make their social integration into the host country extremely challenging. Social inclusion requires frequent contact with the local society, and they need new tools (cultural knowledge, language skills, intercultural skills) to overcome their disadvantages.

This PhD research explores the intercultural aspects and possibilities of visual communication, with the aim of pointing out the benefits and barriers of graphic languages in a multicultural context. The theoretical research has a practical background in the Open Doors project, which creates a complex programme for unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking youth in the country using visual communication, architecture and design. The aim of the programme is to help refugee youth to integrate successfully into Hungarian society, to develop their means of self-expression and their quality relations with the majority society.

Open Doors Hungary is a community-based design project that creates a complex programme for unaccompanied refugee youth in Hungary using visual communication and design. The programme is designed to help refugee youth successfully integrate into Hungarian society, and develop their means of self-expression and quality relations with the majority society. The Open Doors project was founded by the author and her architect partner Erzsébet Hosszu in 2013 and is run in the frames of a Hungarian association Útilapu Hálózat.

Since 2013 the Open Doors project has been working with refugee youth through weekly creative sessions, intensive workshops, and camps based on the integrating role of creativity and art. The refugee youth become part of the design process through these activities, and their choices are the basis for the final result. As a global language, visual communication can be a tool for intercultural communication, storytelling, and self-expression, while working in an intercultural team develops new competences, and creates shared ownership and community.

This PhD research aims to explore the possibilities or the tools of graphic design and creativity in direct work with ref-

ugee youth and to summarize the theoretical and practical results of the project in a methodological guidebook.

Intercultural communication

Cross-border migration processes always involve an encounter with a new culture. In addition, the issue of interculturality may arise within national borders, in the case of small geographical movements or movements between different social groups, which also entail interaction between two different cultures. Thus, the issue of social integration and its relationship with culture concerns a much wider audience than refugees and asylum seekers.

Culture can be seen as one of the major integrating and socializing forces, defined by Haviland (1987) as the set of rules and norms of a society that are considered to be correct and accepted by the members of that society. The more integrated the culture itself, the greater its integrating power, since "the very essence of culture is to ensure the integration of society". The concept of culture is closely related to communication.

Intercultural communication is nothing other than the interaction of people from different cultural groups. This does not necessarily mean different national groups, but in the era of globalisation and in the midst of migration processes, there is a growing need for intercultural competences. We no longer need to cross a national border to encounter another culture, and learning culture is as essential to successful interaction as learning a language, and cannot be avoided in our everyday conversations and work.

"To have an effective and smooth conversation with a foreign partner, or to read a foreign novel, or even to understand an advertisement, or to be successful in marketing, these are all essential skills." (Hidasi, 2004)

Culture is therefore not an innate quality, but an acquired and learned set of knowledge and norms. This fact makes it possible to learn culture and acquire intercultural competences.

Visual communication

"Words divide, pictures unite."

Otto Neurath's famous quote is also the hypothesis of this PhD research. Visual communication, the language of images, has the potential to bridge language barriers and promote intercultural understanding. But is this not too ambitious a statement? Do people from different cultures and social groups really understand the same things in the same way?



This research intends to find and define a visual language that can bridge cultural and linguistic barriers. But to define this, we need to understand the barriers of visual language, the barriers to universal understanding.

This research explores the possible aspects that may make it difficult to read images from a cross-cultural perspective. To analyse the 'reading' of images, we need to examine their relation to written language by examining semi-otic aspects.

The dominance of verbality and the written medium over visually in our modern society is evident. Literacy and language represent a specific historical stage in the formation and development of different civilizations, the ability to read and write has separated and distinguished social classes, and the social significance of literacy is still decisive today. But how do we relate to visual literacy?

While the perception and recognition of images is indeed a universal ability, reading them and decoding their meaning is far from being so. Understanding the pictorial signs that make up visual language is a social process, one that presupposes a social, historical and geographical context, and one that requires prior experience and knowledge.

"Like verbal communication, pictures represent an understanding of the world acquired by members of a certain group, and thus the meaning readers construct from a given image may depend largely on knowledge they share with group members." (Kostelnick, 1993)

According to Charles Kostelnick (1993), there are three levels of social context that influence the perception of images:

1. cultural context - i.e. the shared worldview and values of the group members
2. conventional context - i.e. members of the group share a particular discipline or visual language of a particular discipline or special topic
3. immediate context - i.e. the situation in which the participants use the particular image

Several studies (Kostelnick, Gibson, Goodman, Jones & Hagan) introduce the concept of the "naïve eye", i.e. the reader who is not yet familiar with the world of images, the "visual illiterate", so to speak. These studies disagree as to whether the perception of images is analogous to the perception of real objects (James J. Gibson, 1954) or whether it is necessarily a learned skill (Nelson Goodman, 1976). Gibson, and later supported by Jones and Hagan (1980), argue that the 'naïve reader' of images, such as members of intact cultures isolated from the modern world, or young children, needs very little experience to perceive and recognise images, and thus considers this first stage of image reading to be a plausibly universal ability. In contrast, Goodman rejects the notion of the 'naïve eye', arguing instead that visual communication also embodies a convention-based language that changes from time to time and from culture to culture.

Writing with images

Although most of the existing writing systems of our world are not primarily pictographic in nature, our everyday lives are images, including functional images, which are often as challenging to read as verbal writing systems are to decipher. The reading of images can be challenging both at the level of 'letters', i.e. individual pictorial signs, and at the level of 'sentences' and 'texts', i.e. pictorial compositions or collections of narrative

images. The factors discussed below, the cultural context, including in particular spoken and written language, the context of the conventions recognised by the group, and the immediate context of the situation, all influence the cross-cultural interoperability of visual communication at all levels.

The perception of images and the identification of their elements are, for the most part, truly culture-independent, but their reading is already highly dependent on the cultural and linguistic context and the writing system used by the language in question. The reading of images in different cultural contexts is therefore influenced by a number of factors, such as the writing system of the culture, the direction of reading, the degree of abstraction, and the symbolic meaning of the basic forms, signs, and colours.

Method and practice

In the past years, many new studies are written on the global role of visual communication (Radtke (2020), Murdoch-Kitt (2022), Pater (2016)) This practice-based research connects theory and practice and uses a mixed-methodology approach: on one hand, the author will process the existing literature on the topic of intercultural visual communication, on the other hand, this research examines the experiences of young refugees with visual communication, exploring its potential as a tool for facilitating intercultural understanding and integration through a practical social design project, Open Doors Hungary. Since 2013 the author together with her architect colleague Erzsébet Hosszu has been working with refugee youth through weekly creative sessions, intensive workshops, and camps based on the integrating role of creativity and art. Through these activities, refugee youth becomes part of the design process, and their choices are the basis for the final result. As a global language, visual communication can be a tool for intercultural communication, storytelling, and self-expression, while working in an intercultural team develops new competencies, and creates shared ownership and community.

Minor refugees are a special group, as their situation is not only determined by the inherent characteristics of being a refugee, but also by the fact that they are protected by the childcare system. Their long and dangerous journey and the uncertainty of the asylum application process only exacerbate the so-called "post-traumatic stress disorder", which may have been caused by the trauma of losing their roots or their human connections at home.

The programme aims to achieve a two-way integration process, thus an important element of the programme is the active involvement of members of the host society. Open Doors Hungary's methods include active, creative and community action, non-formal and interactive transfer of culture, cooperation and dialogue between refugees and their Hungarian peers.

Current results and next steps

During the past 10 years, the author has organized 8 (media) camps and weekly creative sessions, where young refugees and their Hungarian and European peers got to know different visual communication tools and created common messages in the form of videos, animations, photos, posters, booklets, murals. Design thinking and the creative process provided an opportunity for interactive cultural exchange, sharing of values, safe and open discussions, and community building.

The findings of this study suggest that visual communication can be an effective tool for bridging intercultural differences among young refugees and the members of the host society. Visual aids served as a tool for mutual understanding, and self-expression and also tools for learning new languages and new skills.

The research will further analyze the role of visual languages from a semantic and semiotic point of view, and will categorize the factors that influence intercultural understanding. Furthermore, the research will explore the role of social media and digital communication in intercultural encounters and its effects on cultural norms and tabus. The research will further analyze the role of visual aids in language learning and the transmission of culture by images.

Besides the ongoing theoretical research, the author will summarize the experiences of the Open Doors project using visual communication and graphic languages to improve interaction and communication between refugees, migrants, and the members of the host society. The result will be a methodological toolkit, that collects the different methods used during the workshops and programs of Open Doors Hungary based on the tools of visual communication. As intercultural



Figure 1. Open Doors media workshop (Photo by the author)

communication is not limited to the interactions between refugees and the host society, the methodological toolkit has a wider audience and can be used in other target groups, such as youth with communication difficulties, mixed background classrooms, or the employees of multinational workplaces.

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