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Visual Influence and Youth Empowerment

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Proposal for IVLA Conference 2017

Investigating the Influence of Commercial Media on Adolescent Development

Abstract:

This 20-minute workshop will provide an overview of the importance of developing visual intelligence in adolescents in order for them to become more aware of the influences commercial and social media has on the ideas they form about themselves and the world. Using art-making as an approach to understanding image manipulation intended to influence our thinking will provide youth with strategies to critically assess their visual consumption.

Workshop Description:

Ann Marie Seward Barry implies that Visual intelligence is building “an understanding of exactly how far we can trust our perception to tell us the truth, and an appreciation of how perceptual process can be manipulated through various media to alter attitudes and behavior” (Barry, p.67). Media influences today have become so pervasive that we don’t even realize we are using them as guiding authority on how to live and what to think. Because media images are so prevalent in our society, their influence is stronger than we would generally expect, given that we rarely respond to media images with a critical eye. This is even more prevalent for youth because of the lack of emphasis given on teaching them to see critically.

Through our vision, we see and understand the world. We learn behavior, how things work and assign meaning to objects, via our emotional responses, our upbringing, memory and through our visual consumption. We come to understand our world through these associations, made to a large degree from our visual experience. During adolescence, youth start to look outside of their spheres of family to explore the greater world. In the desire to understand the world around them, they are often left with visual media as the go-to source of information.

Media makers use the signifiers we know to communicate a message. There are iconic images everywhere and depending on the context and combination, the images we take for granted can be presented in a way that leads us to think according to the image maker’s intent. Media images are contrived to provoke meaning through the use of signs and how they are presented.

Coming to an understanding of image identity, associative learning and media manipulation requires time and a sequence of learning that builds comprehension of abstract ideas. In this workshop, my intent is to run through a condensed version of a sequence of learning I developed with the goal of helping youth empower themselves to become rational agents of their own lives. This means to be conscious of themselves as thinking, willing, and active beings, bearing responsibility for their choices and able to explain themselves by referencing critical inquiries into social constructs. (Isaiah Berlin, 1969, from Moshman, 1999)

By incorporating a version of Philip Yenowin's *Visual Thinking Strategies* and identification of the principals and elements of design we can learn what meaning we make from commercial media image shed light on how that meaning is contrived. We will also use the same strategies to investigate how graphic design artist use cultural signifiers to communicate an idea. These exercises form the base of learning about image/meaning manipulation through a collage project adapted from David Crow in his book, *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts*. Using a collection of recognizable images with culturally shared meanings (iconic) cut from magazines, participants will be instructed to construct a series of visual sentences where a central or key image remains consistent but the sentence meaning changes depending on the other images it is combined with and the way in which the images are combined (placement, emphasis, scale, color, etc.). Participants will then be asked to share their visual sentences with a neighbor, who then writes down in words what their eyes read the sentence to say (Crow, 2010). This exercise will illustrate how associative meaning can be manipulated via image construction and context.

By appropriating the strategies used by commercial media, youth can be further encouraged to create images that promote messages and ideas that are more important and relevant to themselves and their communities.

References:

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Seward Barry, A. (1997). *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image and Manipulation in Visual Consumption*. State University of New York, Albany NY.

Yenowine, P. (2013). *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.