

Images are coloured words in a multi-coloured world

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Abstract

All disciplines use images, but more than others, geography does. Some aspects of geography need more icons, in fact teaching tourism offers many opportunities for using images. Images should be not only presented but analysed and discussed, because normally they disclose and hide messages and meanings. Students know images since childhood at home through television, but usually parents don't teach how to interpret them, because they didn't learn that either. Teachers need to know how to deal with images. For being able to teach, they should know semiotic and cinema techniques; they could be considered competent when they are able to produce movies by themselves and when students are also proficient in practising these techniques; in other words to be able to speak with words and without words, especially in a multicultural world where words constitute a barrier for intercultural communication. A case study is presented here.

Teaching tourism at the University of Bologna

Forward

Throughout my career I have thought that movies were not useful tools for teaching. However media has become more remarkable every day, particularly if we sustain the idea of a "pansemiotic" culture (Knoblauch, 2001: 4). In fact as stated by Gozzi, "as the number of radios and televisions increase in a given high-context culture, people will pay less attention to each other and more attention to the media (1992: 60). Media are of a ubiquitous nature in our lives, especially in cross-cultural studies, so it seems necessary to examine their role in the "communicative paradigm" (Knoblauch, *ibid*) which our brain and our lives are inserted in, while culture can be considered as the construction of contexts by means of communicative actions.

We must use media in teaching several types of languages, because we know there are various types of communication. In fact even silence is a form of communication, so that it could have a meaning: "like a zero in mathematics, it is an absence with a function" (Braithwaite, 1990: 321).

Media communication should be mediated by parents from childhood, but these too are artless respect to the requirements of the emergent technology, and surely they never have had any form of acculturation in this direction. As a consequence, the role of school results is enhanced, since adapting to socio-cultural changes requires knowledge - acquiring that knowledge requires communication (Smith, 1992: 214).

Personal experiences

I have learned, during an Erasmus visit, that movies are much utilized in the UK, due to the number of immigrants with many difficulties in speaking English or with a low level of understanding or knowledge. Inter-acculturation is in fact not easy.

“It goes without saying that every border crossing involves some need for adjustment and acculturation. Just as visitors often find the need to adopt the manners and customs of their host country, so do texts (and things – we add) (Cohen and Roeh, 1992: 23).

It is sure that there is a growing trend among scholars to focus on and to study the “universal” nature of media contents and the “globalization”, because the media markets try to sell products in enlarged markets, creating the lines of a desired “post-Babel” hypothesis (Cohen and Roeh, cit.: 32) or a simple “shared biosphere” (Smith, 1992: 223). In the two last decades the same is also true of Italy, as it became a country of immigration and now we have the same issues that English schools have had.

Movies are useful in teaching geography, because they illustrate the geography of our real world. It is important to pay attention even regarding films narrating the past history, because eventually they are too much elaborated or “modernized”. It is easier to teach geography through images, but it is necessary to understand and to let understand that landscape and situations don’t have an unique point of view, and the perspective could be a revelation of ideas and ideologies. In fact “mass media both reflect and affect a given culture and society” (Berger, 1992: 11).

Research could focus on art forms of various types and attempt to discover changes that were media related (Gozzi, cit.: 61). For these several reasons movies couldn’t be only presented in schools but they should be profoundly analyzed and discussed, as every instrument must be, maybe even more. Films and television require a second level of processing that involves the decoding of symbols that are non media specific, like language and gestures, other than the media-specific symbolic codes that are used to manipulate points of view, location in space, temporal sequence and order, pacing and rhythm, and specific visual effects including fades, dissolves, and wipes (Hobbs and Frost, 1992: 112).

I have tried to manipulate movies in my lessons for the love of geography, in the extreme sense of using them and also producing them. At the beginning, I was accustomed to present films and only superficially to discuss them, but finally, trying an experiment in my classroom, I have followed a scheme suggested by Berger (cit.: 18):

“What is the visual style of the text like? What is the camera work like? What kinds of shots are dominant? What is the lighting like? What editing techniques are used? How sophisticated is the text from a technical point of view?”

The same author suggests that one might for example examine the ways football matches are televised and compare the same matches all around the world. Previous research has suggested that some combination of developmental age and experience with the medium is necessary to successfully decode the complex array of cuts, zooms, pans, music, and other techniques commonly used in film and television editing (Hobbs and Frost, cit.: 110).

Movies in teaching

I suppose that movies can be superb for teaching literature, inspiring criticism, because statistically many novels have been bad translated into cinema, or when they have been good realized, they are in most cases an inferior copy of the written words. But globalisation requires that we know the variety in our world and the rich variety of faces and souls of different peoples, to know from where they derive, how they live far away from us, how they communicate, how they afford the everyday life. Images are necessary for geography, both in books, in computer, in photos...with every instrument, in order to represent the immense heritage we do possess. With the marvellous instruments we manage today, images are usually and necessarily modified and managed, so that the result of modification could correspond to the desired message.

According to this, and according to the exigencies of the media-world, students must gain competences in producing images for themselves and be capable to communicate through images. For this reason, students should be given opportunities to generate communication contents; as they should be clever in writing, producing written material; it is nowadays necessary that they should be trained to write through images. Only in this way can they live in a democratic world, being free and not being manipulated by new instruments and new functionalities, in other terms, avoiding to be coca-colonized (Berger, cit.: 14). Surely this process requires a lot of time, money and efforts, but this can be realized in schools and universities; this could be the final stage after designing charts, graphs, thematic maps, doing photographs

In my experience, I spent lot of time in learning many passages in software images manoeuvring, in order to arrange them as a presentation, but I spent more time in realising my first movie. Nevertheless, during these processes, I learned more geography than supposed, because I visited the studied areas many times, I visualized my pictures many times, I interviewed many persons, I studied the local history and I read the biography of many local authorities, and, most important, I discovered unknown places and activities, old houses and minor ones, but, surely not less beautiful, artistic heritage. In this way, geography has more important functions than other disciplines in the specificity of modern technology, and it assumes a major role in the process of globalization and in the process of mutual understanding through mutual knowledge.

In this sense, the knowledge of the real world, even in its worst aspects such as wars, famine, and natural disasters, becomes a complete education of the person. Real documents are the opposite of fiction which is, in my opinion, completely contributing to bad upbringing. Televisions all around the world are presenting miseducating situations which encounter the taste of youth. The worst of these products is, in my opinion, the series of Harry Potter books and films, because, among the quantity of products we find on the market, it is very easy to find good materials, and why to use the bad ones? As teachers we are obliged to choose the best, from the content point of view, the technological point of view, the formal point of view, and the moral point of view as well.

The real world in images

Multiculturalism is already a fact in universities. Some institutions are very prestigious all around the world and they attract many students from different regions. Bologna is one of them, its status derives from its old age - being the oldest university in the world - and from the efforts spent in order to maintain the reputation gained since ancient times. European

Union also is sustaining the international fame of cultural institutions through numerous exchanges of programs, teachers, employees and students.

A privileged area in this University is the Faculty of Foreign Languages where many European exchanges have been approved and where many students from all the world are inscribed. The teaching personnel is also quite mixed, because here, not only European major and minor languages are thought, but also oriental studies are afforded. In this faculty the privileged disciplines, hosting students of different languages, are Geography of Tourism and Sociology of Tourism (taught by a geographer, or the author of this work). Tourism per se is quite an international topic and many foreign students are choosing this theme sure to find the possibility that their country could be spoken about. In the academic year 2008-09, students from USA, Giordania, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Australia, China and many others from European member and non-member States were present in one course.

Their lessons were taught in Italian language, but not all students could understand it, so the teacher occasionally translated some words in different languages, but the most powerful tool has surely been Internet, thanks to the fact that some lessons took place in media laboratory. In order to avoid nationalism, we had chosen as a main issue for discussion, a neutral argument, the tourism in New Zealand, because anyone had been there or studied the manifestations of this phenomenon over there.

The main tools used in the lessons were many images taken by the teacher during a visit in that country. Being the course based on ecotourism philosophy, images about agriculture and breeding have been utilized, in order to let student impress with the typical green images reflected in all the country. The case study has also offered the possibility to speak about the interesting position local communities have in economy and to recognise how the social peace has been attained through many cultural inter-exchanges between settlers and Maoris.

At the end of the course it was suggested that not only had the students understood which type of tourism were offered by this distant country, but that they would not forget the immense extent of green fields. So, in the final lessons the teacher opted to utilise many images offered on advertised material, directly derived from New Zealand, as the vision of the country with its economy and society that had already been taught.

Particularities in teaching and learning

In Italy teaching methods are quite traditional, based on spoken lessons, while electronic media is emerging at a slow pace. In higher education teaching institutions there is more freedom in programs and more possibilities of experimenting with technology, but little knowledge is offered on innovative methods. Inter-disciplinarity is also requested, because the question of innovation isn't related only to new tools, but to the basic technology requested for utilizing these tools. That means not only to know how a CD or DVD player functions, or to understand presentations, but how the content can be interpreted and the hidden messages read. For this, cinema-psychology theory or media communication psychology is needed.

People from different cultures often have different types of accepted behaviour. People etiquette and manners are often not the same around the world. In addition, there are many aspects of non verbal communication with which we should be acquainted. The situation of our case study presents the great possibility to reflect how the presentation of the same argument could affect students arriving from different backgrounds. Surely it is impossible to realize a personal teaching, and also it is impossible to note the several effects of teaching,

according to personal characteristics, but the idea could be better developed in future or with more time, or by other teachers.

Fortunately I have many tools for teaching geography of tourism, deriving from travels, tours operators' guides and exhibitions gifts all around the world. The most notable material - officially produced by the Government and reported on CD, which were recently obtained - is two disks on Italian heritage.

The first CD presented the continental region of Greece. Its content was atypical, in the sense that classic Greek monuments didn't appear at all. Instead monuments related to the Venetian occupation were presented. Many students have been disappointed, because they had expected classic history to be presented. Only Italian students, at not all, know about the Venetian Republic occupation during the 18th century; foreign students didn't understand even after explanation. That means that some times, surely not stereotypes are expected, but shared icons or shared images, in other words we do expect a national character, according to Gumperz (1992: 51, cited in Knoblauch: 12) who states: "Culture consists of the shared typification that enters into the signalling and use of activity types in interaction, as well as systems of contextualization conventions".

From the technical point of view, in this document the colours and landscape were disappointing, in fact, at this point we should remember that colours are the dominant effect on Greek icons; Santorini is in our mental map with its white-blue houses and blue sky reflecting in dark blue sea. What was strange for the teacher was the fact that the students didn't appreciate the narrator voice, because he was a national narrator, speaking Italian with a Greek accent.

The second movie presented a small Italian region of secondary importance in the Italian tourist market. From a technical point of view, nothing was wrong in this documentary, but the presentation insisted too much on the topic of food, because of its major importance in relation to the landscape. Italian students were quickly bored, but foreign student didn't understand the specificity of food, because it was similar to the gourmet speciality of many other regions in Italy; only residents could really appreciate the nuances in taste of the same family of products. One part of this CD presented local traditions and fests, but these also are too much specific of local authenticity for being understood by non local population. Berger (cit.: 12) pointed to the same fact, that foreigners usually think about some "American character", forgetting that the USA is composed by a "great variety of life-styles, belief structures, attitudes, values, and so on". In fact we usually remind our tourism students that visitors are very curious to participate in local ceremonies, because rites and ceremonies are very particular and colourful as well as providing aspects of authenticity.

The third document was about Kerala in India. The presentation was greatly appreciated because of strong colours of sunsets and landscapes; also rivers, seas and water changed colour in order to attract viewers towards the last asset in international tourism, the spa and fitness facilities. The tour operators also pointed to another aspect, largely utilized in tourist advertisement, the presence of models who were present everywhere.

The fourth document presented a spa situated in an Italian resort in the same region where the city of Bologna is located. In order to avoid localism, the presentation had been shortened. The presentation was judged too technical and specific. The tourist attractions pointed to some monuments, instead of landscape, and students didn't appreciate too much.

The fifth CD was considered to be the best one. It was produced to present tourism in Taiwan. Its excellence was based on high level of movie art technology, founded on different scenes, spots, movements and zooming, utilizing music, songs, instruments and interviews. A student from Taiwan, present in classroom, testified to the authenticity of statements and situations; he was the most interested in the content and in the discussion.

It was clear from this that the use of movies is justified only if they are discussed and reflected upon, if questions are posed, and if images stimulate thoughts.

Conclusion

Culture and knowledge are multi-faced and multi-interpreted, according to personal values, as Umberto Eco has argued: “ Codes and sub-codes are applied to the message in the light of a general framework of cultural references, which constitute the receiver’s patrimony of knowledge: his ideological, ethical, religious standpoints, his psychological attitudes, his tastes, his value systems (1972: 115).

The main question, possible in the classroom situation described above, has not been entirely posed: how students from different cultures interpret or decode our understanding of the world. I noticed that it would require psychological, anthropological competencies that not all teacher could have. In addition, this work requires more time than few hours in a short semester course, more years of course with the same opportunities, but this experience could be a starting point for future reflection. The goal of my classes has not been well focused, because I noticed that the individual predispositions of my students, their schemas, repertoires, life histories were more diversified than their pertinence to an identified country. In other words, I can say that there are more peculiarities among persons than between one population and another.

The final point could be, according to Berger (cit.: 20), “to learn to narrow our focus and qualify our assertion and to recognize how complex cultures and societies are”. In addition – as Gozzi states (cit., p. 112), “a better understanding of the natural strategies for processing audiovisual information could provide a valuable arena for further systematic exploration of visual-cognitive skills in general. Such evidence may help explain the communicative and persuasive power of the medium of television as it compares with other communication tools”. This means that our experience is only a starting point in the understanding the several colours of our globe.

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