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Researching with visual images:
Some guidance notes and a glossary for beginners

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Working Paper

Researching with visual images: Some guidance notes and a glossary for beginners

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This paper is part of a set of course materials for introductory-level training workshops in visual methods given by Jon Prosser.

Key points to consider when starting out

When working with images for the first time it is important is to recognise that:

- there is no 'one-way' visual method or perspective that has ascendancy over all other ways of sense making.
- we don't 'see, we 'perceive' since the former is a biological norm and the latter culturally and psychologically informed.
- all images are regarded as polysemic (having many possible meanings).
- word and number based researchers 'skim' imagery, taking it for granted.
- visual researchers give imagery a 'close reading' (in-depth scrutiny and treating the visual as problematic).
- images can be 'researcher found' (generated by others) or 'researcher generated' (created by the researcher). Both are integral to the visual research process.
- the visual, as objects and images, exists materially in the world but gain meaning from humans.
- A photograph does not show how things look. It is an image produced by a mechanical device, at a very specific moment, in a particular context by a person working within a set of personal parameters.

Glossary of terms commonly used in visual research

Visual research has its own technical vocabulary. Some forms of writing are obtuse and confusing but equally some terms are useful and have a place in communicating ideas. Here is a 'starter pack' providing a basic range of key words.

Audience: when we look at an image we form an audience and determine its meaning. Different audiences viewing the same image at a different time or place may arrive at a different meaning.

Close reading: in-depth scrutiny and treating the visual as problematic.

Discourse: in the restrictive sense, language in use; in a wider sense a body of language use that form a 'social language' such as business-related discourse, architectural discourse or educational discourse.

Genre: images associated or recognised as belonging to an accepted class, are said to be representative of a 'genre'. Dutch still life paintings, for example, form a particular genre.

Icon: a sign that communicates its meaning by looking something like, i.e. resembling the object it refers to.

Indexicality: the property of the context-dependency of signs, hence the need to explore meaning-making in which the placement of a sign in the material world is central.

Interpersonal distance: a culturally determined space that determines whether it is socially appropriate. Often broken down into 'intimate' or 'public' space.

Materiality: the physical composition of the object under study. This is important since it indicates something other than what it is made of. Words written in sand may denote impermanence whilst words in marble suggest permanence.

Narrative structure: examines how a story is communicated. This may refer to a set of documentary photographs, a film or comic strips.

Polysemic: A sign is said to be polysemic when it has more than one meaning. Images are ambiguous and have many possible meanings.

Photo-elicitation: using a photograph as a stimulant in an interview situation. Akin to object, drawing, painting etc elicitation.

Semiotics: the study of the social production of meanings through signs.

Sign: is the basic unit of language and is central to semiotics. In semiotics, a material object that indicates or refers to something other than itself; includes icons and symbols. It consists of the *signified* which is the concept it represents and a *signifier* which is the form the sign takes. Hence 'closed' on a shop door is a sign given meaning by someone turning away from the entrance which consists of the word 'closed' (signifier) and a signified concept ie the shop is not open for business. A sign needs a signifier and a signified.

Symbol: a sign that is conventionally associated with its object of reference.

Territoriality: human and animal tendency to adopt specific spaces for different uses.

Suggested Reading

Banks, M. (2001) *Visual Methods in Social Research*. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.

Banks emphasises empirical visual research but covers a wide range of important issues including strategies, how to 'read' pictures and images as portrayal and narrative. There are numerous examples from visual anthropology (Bank's

specialism) which can be readily adopted by educational researchers with a sociology background. It is interesting, well written and easy to follow – perhaps the best introduction to visual research available.

Prosser, J. (ed.) (1998) *Image-based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers*. Falmer Press. London.

This edited volume is diverse in content offering insights into disciplinary (eg visual anthropology, visual sociology and psychology) and interdisciplinary approaches. In addition, five chapters are case studies having an education theme including pieces on school evaluation, curriculum development, children's drawings, and newspaper cartoons with an education theme. Biased towards photography.

Rose, G. (2001) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.

A coherent book on key issues and perspectives in visual studies. It emphasises a cultural studies and critical theory approach mostly avoiding the empirical and ethnographic stance taken by Banks. This is a well organised book covering many important visual topics that would make a useful set text for a visual culture course for graduates. There a wide range of illustrations and examples aide the reader's understanding.

Van Leewen, T., Jewitt, C. (ed.) (2001) *Handbook of Visual Analysis*. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.

All the chapters are of a high standard in this important book. It provides in depth coverage of themes central to visual research and will prove to be a substantial resource for any visual researcher, even those with considerable experience. A combination of this and Bank's book would meet the needs of most.

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