Engaging youths through visuals

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Introduction

Youths can cultivate a creative mindset through visual literacy (VL). "As with any literacy, visual literacy begins with the development of the brain's capacities over time, through both structured experience (i.e., teaching) and ongoing, informal interactions with the visual environment" (Hailey et al. 2015, p. 51). Baca (1990, as cited in Braden 1996) states that "visual literacy refers to the use of visuals for the purposes of communication, thinking, learning, constructing meaning, creative expression, [and] aesthetic enjoyment" (p. 65). "Visual literacy can serve as a powerful tool in helping young people to develop their creativity and mental flexibility, which can facilitate their growth as expressive and creative thinkers" (Qureshi et al., 2021). In this chapter, the significance of creative freedom and self-expression is examined through four research cycles of artwork created by children between the ages of 10 and 12 and youths between 19 and 22. The artwork itself is assessed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

This study reflects on one of the six artistic experiments that has thus far taken place in the 2020–2023 Finnish research project Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture (AMASS). The AMASS project serves as a basis for the discovery of margins and challenges in the field of VL among children and youths, as well as what tools and methods can be employed to refine this form of literacy. This experiment was implemented predominantly in Finnish Lapland over 2021–2022 in the Arctic city of Rovaniemi, and employed the revised VL definition proposed by Fransecky and Debes (1972):

> Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and symbols natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communications.
>
> *(7)*

According to Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011), VL is grounded in five areas of study, which serve as the main pillars of VL theory: visual communication, visual language, visual learning, visual perception and visual thinking (VT). Hortin (1980) likewise discusses three basic VL principles: (1) visuals constitute a language and thus are analogous to verbal language; (2) a visually literate person should be able to understand (read)

images and use (write) visual language; and (3) a visually literate person should be able to process information visually to think visually. Arnheim (1969) further explains the development of VL by introducing the approach of thinking out loud and asking people what they see, understand and decode, and how they create meaning using visuals. This approach is further examined by Housen (2002), who argues that visual perception, interpretation and meaning-making – which belong to the domain of psychology – can be interpreted and helped through creative processes (Hailey et al. 2015).

Based on the selected components of VL theory (perception and interpretation) and Hortin's (1980) three principles of VL, this study examines the importance of being visually literate (Kędra 2018) by using arts-based methods (ABMs) for mental imagery, visualisation, interpretation, problem-solving and processing mental thought – all of which can enable youth to be creative. This research's objective is to investigate how VT can be used as a tool and method from the perspective of arts-based research (ABR) to stimulate the creative process in youths. VT is an integral part of learning and can be honed through practice with various learning processes, such as thinking aloud and turning intangible ideas into tangible forms with the help of visual strategies, methods or tools that help visualise the development of ideas, thoughts, questions, reflections, narratives, mind maps and so forth (see Gholam 2018).

This experiment employed a flexible and multi-faceted qualitative ABR approach during each research cycle to examine youths' creative expression(s) via mandala making, photography, interviews, essays, portfolios, documentation and group discussions. This method was adapted to verify the effectiveness of VL in enhancing and building useful knowledge for youths to develop reflective and creative thinking, which involves self-assessment, belief, judgement and behaviour.

Target population

This research began with youths aged 19–22 years old who were students with an art and design background from the University of Lapland, Finland. As the research advanced, the target population progressively widened due to the scope of the study. During the pilot study workshops (Qureshi et al. 2021), the youths were asked how they gained access to a certain level of VL through experiences acquired in formal and informal settings. This question spurred further research on how VL may assist young people in becoming creative thinkers over time (Yenawine 2004). Due to the participatory nature of the experiments, the research enabled a deeper investigation into the trajectory of VL and its effects among young people over ten years of age. Because COVID-19 was peaking at the time of this research, more workshops were not possible, so the 13–18 age group requires further study. Table 1.1 outlines the demographic information of the current target population involved in the four research cycles.

Table 1.1 Target population in the four research cycles of the engaging youths through visual(s) experiment, 2021–2022

Research cycle	Participants	Age (years)	Gender
1	4	19–22	F
2	4	19–22	F
3	13	19–22	F
4	16	10–12	10F, 6M

Methodology and procedure

The AMASS project investigates the arts in relation to societal challenges, especially in marginal regions in Europe. Among the case studies conducted in this context, this experiment, which specifically focused on Finnish youths' VL in Rovaniemi, indicated the necessity of arts-based learning in formal and informal education. The youth services provided by the city yield many opportunities for the inclusion and well-being of young people (City of Rovaniemi 2022), but they lack arts involvement from the VL perspective. Arts education is similarly lacking. Therefore, the goals of this research were to (i) access the level of VL among Rovaniemi's youth, and (ii) verify if VT enhances mental imagery, visualisation, interpretation and problem-solving. This led to the following research questions: (i) How can VT contribute to the meaning-making processes of young children and youths?; (ii) How can young children and youths acquire basic knowledge of VL's importance in creative learning processes? and (iii) How can the forms of documentation, interpretation and reflection used in artistic processes assist youths' creativity?

Experiment overview

This research was based on an evolving artistic experiment that consisted of four case studies, resulting in a research process that was performed in cycles. The four cycles are discussed below.

Research cycle one

The experiment began with an unconventional ABR method. The first case study (Qureshi et al. 2021) assessed VL levels among youths aged 19–22 living in Rovaniemi, Finland. In addition, the study examined how VL affects students' learning and determined whether it ought to be emphasised in K-12 learning. A prototype model, Wagner and Schönau's (2016) Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy, was applied to validate VL competency during the workshop. The model enabled an understanding of the research process and how the methods of data collection produced new knowledge about the skills and attitude changes of the participants, as identified in their reflections (Qureshi et al. 2021, p. 255).

Interpretation is subjective (Messaris 1987, 1994). It occurs in the mind and is affected by individual biases. It is the process that helps us comprehend the experiences we encounter, focusing on meaning, expressions, emotions or a personal response that relates to our experience (Qureshi et al. 2021). A person's perception and interpretation cannot be the same as another's. Therefore, to understand the participants' perspectives of subjectivity in this study, the phenomenological approach was used to examine the data. The workshop data were also assessed using IPA, which demands that the researcher play an active role in the interpretation process when decoding participants' subjective perceptions and experiences of objects and events (Smith 2004; Tuffour 2017). During the workshop, the visual data collected from the participants' personal mandalas provided insight into their artistic expression(s), as can be seen in Figure 1.12.

Research cycle two

The second research cycle (Qureshi 2021) was an extension of the first study and focused on the same youths' documentation, reflection and interpretation skills. The study

Figure 1.12 Personal mandalas created by the participants, research cycle one, 2021.

discussed the role of VL among youths and how visual language and cultural representations can foster an individual's visual reflexivity and understanding.

The study employed two methodological approaches: (i) reflexivity, in the context of examining one's beliefs, judgements and practices during the research process and how these may influence the research (Finlay 1998; Hammond and Wellington 2020), and (ii) constructivism, which argues that individuals acquire knowledge of the world and that it can be positively constructed based on our experiences (Hall 2013; Mills et al. 2006; Schwandt 1994). During the study, important questions began to emerge regarding young peoples' reflexivity and how reflection can contribute to developing their personal representations. Figure 1.13 features some of the participants' unique contributions and highlights the importance of visual images in the VL context, as well as how the participants' experiences and the documentation role affected the interpretation of the group's experiences (Qureshi 2021, p. 250).

Figure 1.13 Close-up object photographs taken by the participants, research cycle two, 2021.

Research cycle three

The third case study (Pietarinen et al. 2021) involved visualising and mirroring the voices of youths to re-engage with their personal experiences post-COVID-19. As part of this study, the participants (aged 19–22) explored their own narratives and art choices to explore the boundaries of VL, as well as to derive novel ideas about what they want to achieve in the future. The purpose of this study was to reveal new perspectives by investigating the materiality and spatiality of the participants' expressions, works and interactions. The workshop provided the youths and artist-researchers (i.e., authors) with knowledge about pluralism and how to apply it in their (re-)design thinking (Pietarinen et al., 2021, p. 217).

The artist-researchers used narrative inquiry combined with a reflexive analysis. The results provided insight into the participants' subjective and emotional reactions during the workshop. Using ABMs in research with experimental and improvisatory

Figure 1.14 Photos of the Flag installation artwork designed by the participants, research cycle three, 2021.

approaches for analysis can generate significant impacts (Levine 2013). By means of the same approaches, the participants were able to test, evaluate and compare artistic methods and how to use them, transforming them into a thoughtful, personal process. This can be seen in Figure 1.14, the photos of which were taken during the making of the *Flag* installation.

Research cycle four

The aforementioned three research cycles led to a fourth case study (Qureshi et al. 2022). This case study mainly focused on children over the age of ten to examine their VL level. To develop VT skills for reflective thinking, the study examined visual learning that taps into children's voices and expressions. The findings were presented at the AMASS 2022 academic
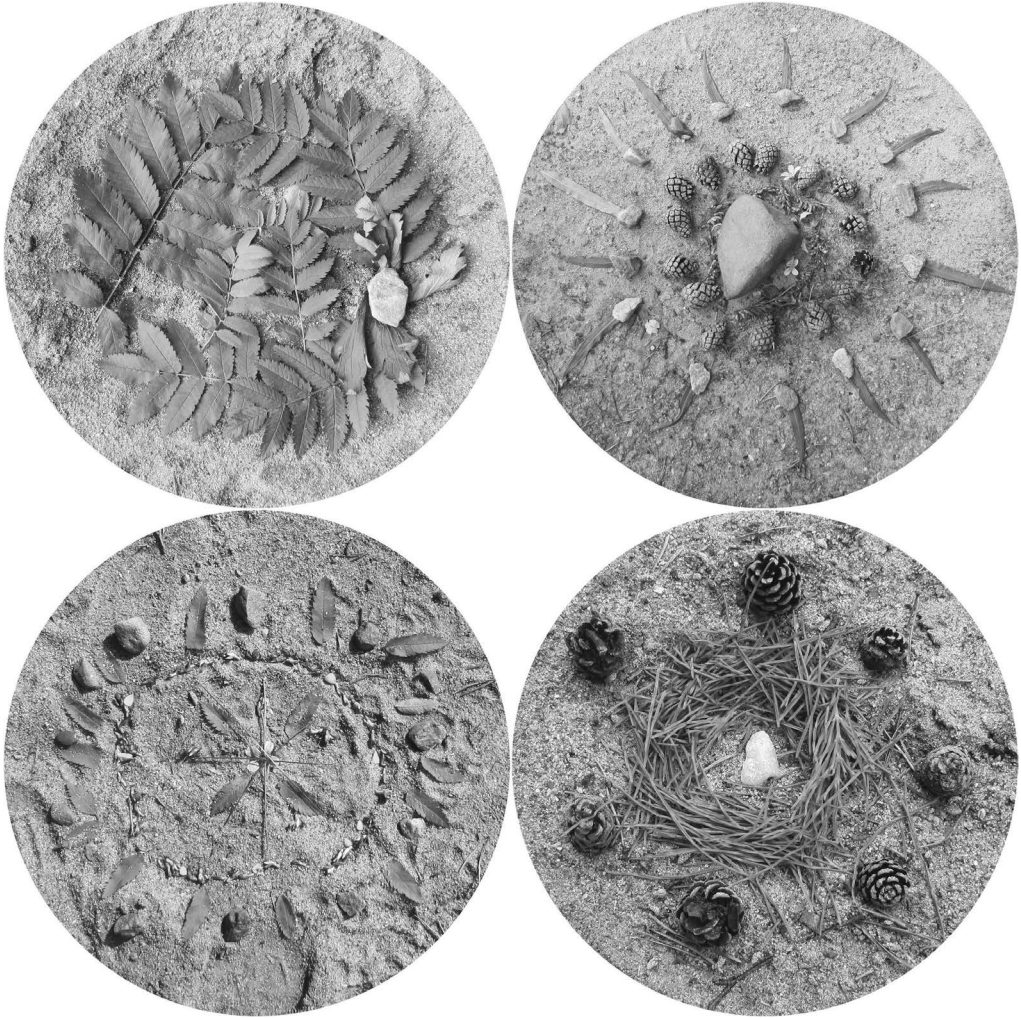
Figure 1.15 Photos of the nature mandala artwork designed by the participants, research cycle
        four, 2021.

conference (see the Appendix), and were also disseminated as an exhibition (Qureshi 2022)
at Gallery Kopio, University of Lapland, Finland (see Figures 1.15 and 1.16).

The study was a qualitative phenomenological inquiry into children's reflexive activity and was conducted during a summer workshop held at the University of Lapland in
2021. The research examined the children's views on their creative processes. The young
participants were asked to share their reflections on their experiences of making mandalas with naturally found objects. This ABM led to the invention of the visual design
thinking (VDT) model (Qureshi et al. 2022), which involves unconventional, creative
processes to assess children's existing VL and determine what can be done to facilitate
it. The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine and discuss a prototype VDT
model that can support young children to foster their VL using various visual methods.
This research revealed that the children's perspectives were instrumental in transforming

Figure 1.16 Photos of the exhibition conceived by the study's researcher (author), research cycle four, 2021.

ABMs into design formats that can be integrated into formal and non-formal learning (Ware 2010). Adopting the perspective of a child artist to understand the visual language of youth provided inspiration for building this new knowledge to comprehend VL (Kárpáti and Gaul 2013).

Ethical considerations

This experiment followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, as reviewed by the ethics committee of the University of Lapland, Finland. The participants provided informed and written consent prior to the start of each study. All participants and their guardians (where necessary) provided written permission to use their artistic results. Moreover, it was clarified from the start that the participants could withdraw at any time, even after the study was completed.

Summary of assessment methods and outcomes

The data collected from the participatory mixed-methods experiment's case studies were analysed using a qualitative ABR approach (Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2017), coupled with the phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 2004). The ABMs involved mandala making, photography, observations, interviews, portfolios, documentation, writing descriptive narratives about the experiences and sharing views on how the artistic processes enhanced the participants' perceptions, interpretations and meaning-making skills. In all four research cycles, the data were analysed using a thematic analysis of the visual images and artwork that the participants co-created.

The case studies were further analysed using reflective narratives provided by both the participants and the researcher. The workshop participants (aged 19–22) wrote essays discussing their learning processes and experiences. For instance, research cycle three featured a three-dimensional sensory writing exercise involving self-reflection and creative writing. This type of writing practice uses figurative language that is precise and persuasive and employs sensory language to make people, events and ideas more expressive. By using this method, the researcher gained insight into the participants' thoughts, as they described in detail what they aimed to convey. Consequently, the researcher could identify what the participants had learned through the ABMs and their subsequent attitude changes. All these assessment methods contributed to a better understanding of VT as a tool, which led to the idea of the VDT model (Qureshi et al. 2022). Exemplary narratives of the participants' experiences in the experiment are as follows:

> For me personally, if I look at it [personal mandala], this is also the thing of art. We have embedded stories into our mandalas knowingly or unknowingly. But those stories then become detached from us in the artwork itself and those stories are there for other people to start to read and interpret and make their own meanings from.
> *Participant 3, Visual Literacy Workshop (2021)*

> I've had my challenges understanding this kind of work. It is to be seen if the arts-based study is something I'll want to explore more. Sure, I have already learned from this experience many things I can use later. So far, I've at least learned to trust the process and tolerate uncertainty. I've also found that I very much like studying a concept and how it could be interpreted in a visual form.
> *Participant 2, FLAG – A Shared Horizon Workshop (2021)*

The four research cycles within this VL experiment yielded four promising outcomes:

- VL is an important form of literacy that children and young adults ought to be encouraged to learn and develop throughout their various learning stages because it fosters introspection.
- The reflections shared by the children and youths demonstrated the need to supplement formal and informal learning settings with open dialogue and reflexive practices both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, the reflections assisted in articulating and expressing the content of one's imaginative expressions.
- In addition to enhancing creativity, boosting self-esteem and cultivating individual emancipation, the studies also demonstrated that progressive arts-based collaborative processes can facilitate idea sharing and understanding.
- Empowering youths to engage in social innovation through creative processes can help them become positive agents of change in society.

Policy implications

Educational and cultural policies that foster the development of youths' identities can be designed to increase the number of creative citizens. Providing youths with a sense of inclusion and ownership over their artwork is one such means of motivating them in their personal representations. The arts are thus a valuable component of education, and their inclusion in formal and informal educational settings can provide young children and

youths a deeper understanding of challenging concepts, and therefore decrease anxiety in relation to demanding subjects.

VL-inspired ABM methods can also help achieve new paradigms in educational policymaking, especially when embedded in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics education (STEAM) models. To improve the education of young adults, the establishment of STEAM models for learning in formal and informal settings would make it possible to guide student inquiry, dialogue and creative thinking away from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) models (Herranen et al. 2021; Yakman 2008). For a better understanding of STEAM-based policy implications, it is imperative to grasp the difference between the two models: STEM focuses explicitly on scientific concepts, and STEAM investigates these concepts through creative inquiry and problem-based learning methods. Therefore, VL-inspired ABMs can contribute to the formulation of educational policy since they help create meaning for oneself and for others. If society needs more advanced thinkers to fulfil the needs of STEM industries, then it is up to society to prepare citizens who are capable of this advanced thinking (Yakman 2008).

Conclusion

To conclude, youths can become more creative through frequent engagement with VL. Enhanced VL articulation can be achieved by observing VT in action, which can make youths better visual thinkers. The VL-themed, arts-based experiment discussed in this chapter has exhibited promising results for the youths of Rovaniemi, Finland. Although the experiment was conducted only in this region, it can be adapted to other parts of Europe to analyse and interpret youths' creative perceptions. In general, enhancing young people's understanding of how being visually literate can facilitate attitude changes and decision-making can have a positive impact on creative thinking and meaning-making capacities. Finally, and most importantly, the study's findings can be used by educators, professionals and policymakers working on projects meant to provide youths with the tools to think visually and inspire one another.

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Appendix

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