

# SEEING BEYOND: VISUAL APPROACHES IN GLOBAL LEARNING

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## Introduction

Visual methods and theories are no longer only relevant to filmmakers, media critics, photographers, communication researchers, and self-identified visual anthropologists. Increasing numbers of people acknowledge the broader role that visual approaches play within fieldwork, research, social critique, and cultural representation (Pink 2006). Fewer, however, consider the significance of the visual in teaching and learning, and how visual approaches allow us to teach what culture and global awareness really is. Whether in a classroom on a US campus or during an international service-learning program in Jamaica, visual frameworks guide students to trace linkages and challenge constructs and, thus, provide the competencies necessary for cultural and global understanding.

Visual thinking and acting break down a number of boundaries—whether academic, cross-cultural, or pedagogical—and challenge categorical distinctions. And they can do so without denying the existence of conceptual realities but by demonstrating that the objects of our inquiry are surfaces of extremely deep, complex, and typically invisible phenomena. One distinction that quickly dissipates in visual approaches is between method and theory. Educators and students soon recognize that they cannot act visually without considering visual politics, the role of the invisible, and the authority of sight, and visual theorists certainly rely on visual practices for the musing, researching, and representing theoretical concepts. For our purposes, what is most relevant about this deconstruction of conceptual dichotomies is that it is at the core of global learning. Categories must be shattered to achieve global

learning and instill cultural insight in our students. Global competency rests on the acquisition of skills and abilities that break through boundaries and chip away at established categories about selves, nations, geography, communities, and identities, as well as academic paradigms and accepted hierarchies. Visual approaches provide the experiential contexts for these connections and disconnections to occur.

## Visual Connections

It was filmmaker Jean Rouch who demonstrated how complex “theoretical” connections were made visible through the “methodological” inclusion of the filmmaker, where the filmmaker, along with the camera, became an actor or subject that added to the community or culture being represented. By merging theory and method, as well as shifting between the visible and unseen, his *cinéma vérité* overcame the authoritarian sight of the enlightenment in which viewers observe and consume others through distanced surveillance and by constructing objective notions of knowledge (Grimshaw 2001). These visual forms of interference, however, are not only applicable to filmmaking but also have broader relevance to teaching and learning about culture and the world.

Whether in classrooms or in the field, visual methods challenge viewers’, readers’, students’, and researchers’ positions of authority. With visuals, learners of all types no longer acquire knowledge from a singular distance but rather become embedded in the production of the image or subject matter under consideration. In so doing, distinctions between subjects and objects dissolve, connections are created, and students begin to see reflections of themselves in others and in the knowledge they encounter. Students have the opportunity to work through and embody a critical understanding of culture as constructed

of invisible flows and intersections that provide meaning to the visible.

These types of integrative pedagogies are not solely reliant on visual methods. However, when educators encourage students to engage in transformational and creative practices and processes (i.e., to make external visual representations), they set a foundation for the critical consideration and application of theoretical concepts. Students become immersed in a holistic phenomenological experience where they intuitively feel, live, understand, and intellectually accept their roles, their positions in the world, and their responsibility in the process that leads to products. Of course, these types of instructional methods put the onus on the educator who becomes responsible for re-creating an experience where students actively look, re-create, challenge, and learn about themselves and the world through awareness of their roles as producers and consumers.

## Making the Link for Students: The Field

Visual thinking aims to breakdown barriers, challenge established ways of thinking and learning, and encourage students to jump off the “verandas” of privileged sight and entitlement. This applies to all forms of visual learning, but it has particular relevance for study abroad. Too often in study abroad situations, students (as well as the programs, administrators, instructors, and parents) recreate a knowable and comfortable living and learning environment on a “veranda,” where students view their international educations, the cultures in which they are learning and living, and the experience itself from a privileged distance (Ogden 2007). In these extreme cases, students are nothing more than tourists, with an international education instead of a camera (both, ironically, involve studying from a distance).



photo by Allysia Schwartz

*Figure 1. Global Understanding through Service-learning in Jamaica*

One way of encouraging students to get off the veranda is transforming them from recipients to producers of knowledge. They must actively reflect on their own positions that impact the knowledge they seek and imagine their educational experience as a constant collaboration. They should reach out while simultaneously looking back and take ownership of their education. International service learning perfectly suits this type of engagement and involvement. Getting students involved in community partnerships, for example, encourages them to step away from their role of observer and provider and into the role of participant and listener (i.e., the one viewed). It challenges ideas about authority and urges students to be the recipients of the gazes of their own academic theorizing.

I take Indiana University undergraduates from across disciplines and campuses on an international service-learning program in Westmoreland, Jamaica for four weeks every summer. Together, we provide service, live with families, become quite immersed in the culture and community, and consider the linkages between local

and global phenomena. In 2008, the students worked on discovery kits with the objective of representing Jamaican culture in a local and global context. Discovery kits are teaching resources for K-12 educators who use them in classrooms to discuss particular cultural practices from around the world. They are intended to be educational, sensory, engaging, and interactive; they typically include books, presentations, images, essays, and material objects that represent some aspect of culture. What I have learned, however, is that these discovery kits are not only beneficial for the K-12 audiences they are intended for, but the process of actively creating them is invaluable for instilling an understanding of culture and global awareness in adult learners. It hones critical thinking, insists on a complex representation of culture, demonstrates the constructed nature of social phenomena, and traces the links between the global and local.

After approximately three weeks in the field, students began to consider how they would teach about Jamaica to a young audience. Discussions ensued about what represents Jamaicans and

Jamaican culture, what objects are most significant in the lives of Jamaicans, what type of people should be interviewed as representatives of contemporary Jamaica, and how the culture of Jamaica should be depicted. Students determined that they would include essays about particular topics that represent the intersection of the local and the global and about Jamaica more broadly. They were confident they wanted to incorporate interviews with locals as well as letters and artwork from children. They carefully selected items they found to be vital to an accurate representation of Jamaican culture. They felt compelled to include photographs of their new friends and food, CDs of reggae music, and boxes of herbal teas and other traditional medicines. They added birthday cards from loved ones overseas, western union receipts, dominoes and marbles, a Bible, and employee name tags from tourist resorts. Cell phones and the ubiquitous Digicel calling cards were also considered mandatory, as the students were keenly aware of the local and global importance of this technology (Horst 2006). Ultimately, students defined Jamaican culture as consisting of global technologies, local foods and global imports, intimate connections to the US and the UK, high fashion, music, herbal medicine, the hypocrisies and many sides of tourism, extended families and communities, unemployment, remittances, and the centrality of religion in social life. The voices and visions that demonstrated this diversity were provided through children, adults, grandmothers, artists, parents and grandparents, churchgoers, the employed and the unemployed, visiting family from the US, and, of course, the students themselves.

Taking all the complexity of Jamaican cultural phenomena and translating it visually and pedagogically added a dimension of learning in which students delineated the learning outcomes they hoped to achieve. As such, the visual approach became a pedagogy that imposed a self-awareness of what exactly the students had learned or should learn during their experience in Jamaica. In

other words, students taught themselves how to learn (Fink 2003). Of course, it helped that the students had already been in the field for a number of weeks, lived with Jamaican families, run a day camp for local youth, and had become fully committed to a local community. By the time they worked through this process, they truly cared and wanted to represent the breadth of Jamaican culture as accurately and intimately as possible. One cannot overestimate the role of this heartfelt commitment, though other elements contributed as well. Because students had to determine what they would want others to know about Jamaica and how best to represent Jamaican culture, they were placed in the unique position of educator. They were given ownership of their knowledge and education. The practicality of having them visually dissect Jamaican culture provided them with an analytical experience not dissimilar to cinema vérité, where visual methods are used to tap into intangible understanding. The making of these discovery kits became a mini-ethnographic process, as it encouraged students to feel, engage, de-mystify, and objectively and subjectively represent a Jamaican culture comprised of multiple voices that are deeply meaningful and connected to the rest of the world.

### Making the Link for Students: The Classroom

Visual methods produce significant learning experiences because they mimic the real processes where cultural objects, images, and ideas gain meaning, but you do not need to be abroad to have students gain from these pedagogies. My students do similar transformational activities while in classes on the campus of Indiana University, such as when I have them create social action art projects for a course on human rights and the arts. Not only does the production of art help them understand the social life behind objects and concepts, but it also helps them intimately feel human rights as well as significantly learn and gain skills of critical thinking, analysis, and cultural intuition. The



photo by George Rehrey

*Figure 2. Components of the Jamaican Discovery Kit  
(with borrowed passport)*

process of thinking about and actually making the art, with all its symbolism, behind-the-scenes significance, and contexts of meaning, becomes an embodied metaphor for how representations of all kinds are mere surfaces that must be excavated with analysis to get to the cultural complexity that is doing the framing and providing the meaning. Students are also encouraged to think about their artwork as agents for change, and the realization that students can and do make a difference is yet another breakthrough.

Unfortunately, the teaching and learning of anthropology too often relies on visual methods as tools for observing rather than as an active part of the production of knowledge itself. This explains the primacy of ethnographic films in introductory undergraduate anthropology courses, the predominance of writing, the viewing of images from the field, and the near absence of student-created images, films, concept maps, visual journals, or artwork. Anthropology in general has failed to translate the progressive nature of field research and ethnographic writing into our classroom techniques

and methods. Our classrooms are far more traditional, western, and not whatsoever as international as we might imagine. Perhaps due to ease and precedence, we typically resort to lectures, written assessments, occasional discussions, and the viewing but not the production of visual imagery. We likely share with the majority of faculty members a persuasion to choose lectures as our primary method of instruction, even with a long history of research that demonstrates the limited effectiveness of lecturing (Fink 2003).

When you are being taught by lecture, many times it is easy to just listen but not really comprehend what has happened.... I believe you learn more about other cultures from seeing and studying art, which requires critical thinking because it is an interactive process.... By doing the social action project, I felt that I was made to look deeper at the issue. I had to look at the problem [from] another perspective and address the underlying issue. The hardest

part was not making the art piece, but instead on how to create a piece of artwork that would affect the viewer (student reflective essay, 2009)

How better to have students encounter invisible undercurrents—the foundations of culture that we so intimately know but are often unable to teach in our students—then to have them actually mimic the processes by creating images, incorporating visual methods, and generally learning to think more analytically and critically about what is behind the scenes. This could counter one of the largest instructional voids that lead to conceptual bottlenecks in cultural anthropology classrooms. Rather than having students memorize the typical terms and categories of anthropological teaching, visual approaches encourage students to engage in the complexity of culture that lies behind these and other notions and practices.

Faculty should “share the camera” so that students become engaged in a dialogue where they are producers of knowledge. This will encourage students to implicate themselves and see their own linkages to local cultures and global phenomena. Having students perceive how products (whether school projects, images, labels, perceptions, identities, etc.) are intimately linked to the processes that constantly define and redefine them is vital to achieving global learning. Students will see their roles in the dialogue, the importance of reciprocity, and how established authorities of representation can be shared and challenged through multiplicity, through collaboration, and by merging theories and methods (Jackson 2008; Tchen 2006). They will understand how knowledge (and all categories of inquiry) is not based upon *one* perspective from *one* point of view. They will become scholars who have intuitively experienced the bigger (invisible) picture and are locally and internationally engaged.

### Conclusion: Seeing Ourselves

An omnipotent distanced optical metaphor of observation slips into teach-

ing and learning when researchers and students view objects and others from lofty conceptual verandas and through physical and ideological difference. Contemporary ethnographic scholarship often works toward overcoming these remnants of institutional inequalities. The difficulty, however, is to teach our students the ethnographic skill to see behind the recipients of our gazes. The ability to get students to look beyond cultures, objects, concepts, and images is imperative, as is their ability to look back at themselves. Visual approaches can do just this. By providing mirrors of reflection, visual approaches trace and intimately symbolize the complex linkages between students, cultures, and entities of inquiry. They challenge categories that students have simply accepted or deepen understanding of definitions that students have merely memorized. Visual approaches provide access to what culture really is, how it is extensively invisible, and how it is extremely complicated, shifting, and locally and globally signified. They get students to acquire global competency and cultural literacy with a truly human dimension. Most importantly, visual approaches encourage learners to step off the academic verandas that still exist within our pedagogies of teaching and learning. Visual frameworks become guides for seeing beyond not only the objects of student inquiry but also the world and the students' positions within it.

**Key words:** visual approaches, cultural awareness, global teaching

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