Flictionary – Towards a more visual language

By **Torben Grocholl** | Images by **Torben Grocholl & Marlies Pöschl**

Throughout educational careers most of us experience a vast number of tiring and pretty much text-centred activities. Far too often the transfer of knowledge, ideas and information is mainly organised with a strong focus on the spoken and/or written word, confronting us with filled blackboards and text-heavy slides. The digital revolution came along, raising big hopes for almost everybody in the field of education. But although it brought us an overload of new media and communication technologies offering various multimedia applications for presenting information in a more joyful and human way, the situation of learners worldwide did not change that much for the better. The former analogue media was more or less displaced by the omnipresence of presentation software that even allowed for "attacking" audiences with an amount and density of text and data that was thus far unimagined. The medium changed, the dominance of text stayed. "Death by PowerPoint" became a widespread and symptomatic phenomenon of our time.

But recently the field is in movement. What we can see at the moment is an ongoing shift towards more visual communication and language in many areas of society – including the field of education.
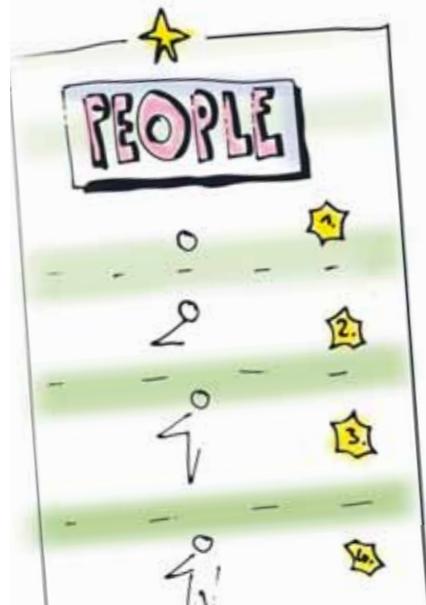
What's the point of visual language?

Visual language can be defined as the integration of words and visual elements. It is thus the combination of text, shapes and imagery to illustrate content in order to support the transfer of knowledge and ideas, and to increase understanding and retention. Especially when it comes to situations where the density of information or the level of complexity is rather high, the use of visual language is of a great value for perception and overall understanding, and has a deep impact on the further processing of information.

Visualisations can grasp attention and increase a learner's level of motivation and commitment. Combining spoken and/or written words with visual elements and thus offering multi-sensual stimuli has an impact on how people perceive information and retain facts in their memories. Even complex issues can very often be sized down into strong and meaningful images that complement the written and spoken words and contribute to so-called big-picture thinking.

In fact almost every communication – especially in the field of education – goes along with the intention of a communicator to "draw" or to develop a clear and detailed picture in the mind of the receiver. The common phrase "I see what you mean!" makes that aspect literally quite clear. So the challenge is to stimulate and evoke these inner pictures for your audience by applying visual language into your presentations.

The flipchart as an underestimated tool

At this point the "old-school" medium of the flipchart becomes relevant again. The simple use of (large) paper and pens offers a huge potential and variety of – mostly unused – opportunities regarding visual facilitation. It can be seen as a really flexible and interactive tool for (live) visualisations as well as for "normal" presentations in groups up to 20 people. The following tips and tricks can thus be easily applied to the flipchart but not only. Most of them are however relevant for almost every other medium or presentation tool such as handouts, whiteboards or even presentation software.

Creating a visual language – What does it mean?

In order to work more visually there are some general principles and fundamentals that can be combined and applied in designing your educational materials:
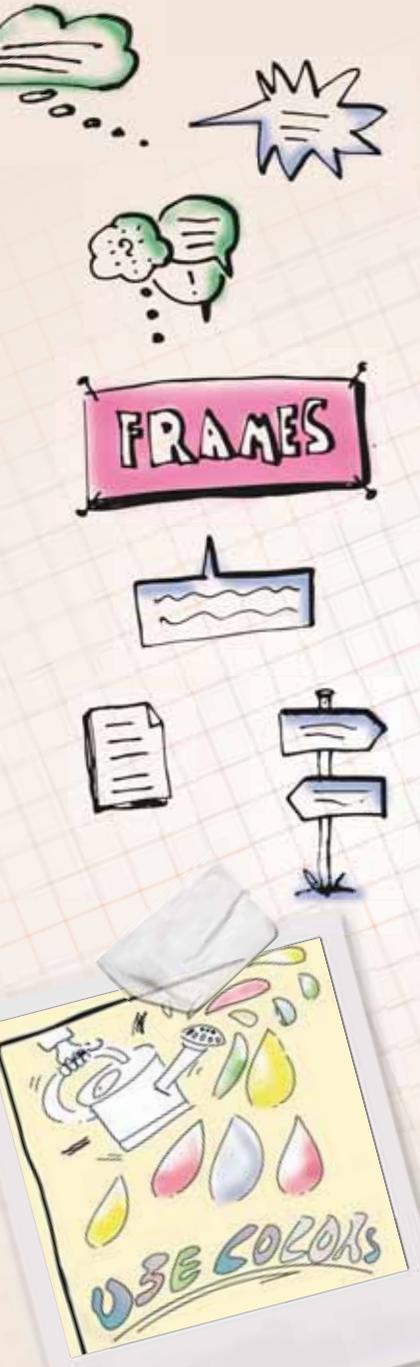
1. Typography: Textual information remains important, even though it should be considered as equal to the visual elements and – most important in presentations – to the spoken word. The shape of text and letters can vary in many ways and thus underline the content and your message.

2. Bullets: Bullet points are important little tools that help to categorise information. You can make many different kinds of bullet points: round, squares, stars, etc. They can even be shaped specifically to the topic you are talking about in many different ways.

3. Frames: Frames are essential and easy-to-draw tools to structure your content, to set focus and to increase the readers' ability to retain information. Via frames you can cluster your information and make explicit that "this is something and that is something else". Frames can be modified and shaped in many ways and can even give hints to what kind of information you are actually talking about. For example, speech bubbles for statements, thinking clouds for thoughts, banners for headlines, etc.

4. Connections: Use eye-catching and visible arrows to make explicit correlations between the individual elements of information. It makes it easier for your audience to understand an overview and to keep track of the "bigger picture". Dynamic signs can also be used to create a flow of information and liven up your presentation.

5. Images: Use simple smileys and cartoons to add emotions to your content; draw little stick figures to make your presentation more human. Pictures can provoke emotional reactions that support learning processes. Visualisations and images contribute to the understanding of a topic by helping people grasp an idea more easily. Sometimes a simple image can explain more than a lot of words – just think about traffic signs for instance. In order to provide significant imagery it is really helpful to be clear about the core point of what you want to say. What is your message and what image can underline or even replace it? How can it be visualised quickly?

6. Colours: In addition to all this, the strategical use of a limited range of colours (maybe 2-4) is highly recommendable. Use colour to ground your information and to accentuate structures. Draw outlines with dark colours and fill in the spaces afterwards. Be aware that colours – as everything mentioned above – can support individual learning and group processes, but can also create confusion.
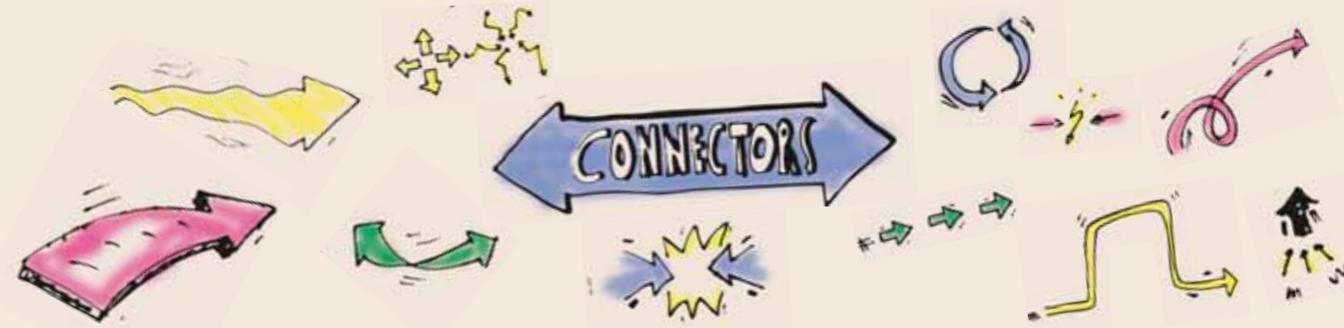
Hurdles and barriers

A lot of the information mentioned above might sound like common sense to you. But even though the benefits of visual communication in the learning process are quite obvious, documented and traceable, its implementation into everyday working or training practice remains challenging, tricky and very often an insurmountable hurdle. Why is that? What makes it so difficult to implement techniques we had much fun with when we were kids into our work?

Most people are convinced that they are not creative or good at drawing, mostly because they were told so by parents, teachers, etc. At some point in life we seem to lose interest in expressing ourselves visually. In the "adult world", drawing, doodling and playing with colours and shapes becomes inappropriate for most of us, even though it can be considered as something very inherent to human nature. Instead, we unlearn our natural skills and suppress them in a culture in which learning and working is very much text oriented.

Time to unlock creativity!

If you decide to (re)discover these abilities and to think and work more visually it only takes a few steps to kick off a fun and joyful learning process. Developing a visual language takes time of course. But once you are on the way it is an inspiring journey with surprising moments and results. You can start practising by implementing visual language step by step into your everyday life and/or work. First for personal note taking, project planning, mind mapping – you can even spice up your shopping list with visuals – and at a later stage or at the same time in your work with others, in groups and presentations. You can also get a personal sketch book from an art store to practise. It is a good way of keeping track of your visual learning path. Be open and look for visual inspirations that you can adopt into your field of work. The Internet is a great resource. Search for images according to your specific topics and interests. Adopt, modify and draw them with a pen on paper. Play around with forms and shapes! As a personal resource and helpful tool you can also create your own visual dictionary – a kind of collection of useful images that you can keep with you in your work and go back to them whenever you need. It can even be used the same way as a sticker album – just with visuals – to share with your colleagues.

You don't have to be Walt Disney!

While exploring the field there is one thing that you should always keep in mind: you don't have to be Walt Disney! Working more visually does not mean drawing beautiful pictures. It is all about simple little drawings that activate people's attention and foster understanding. In fact, people's brains are mostly activated when looking at drawings that are not perfect but slightly ambiguous. Following a concept by Scott McCloud – a leading theorist on comics – "amplification through simplification", it can even be stated that sizing down an image to its very essentials by taking away features and making it more and more abstract actually allows the individual viewer to put more meaning into it. In other words, a simple stick figure can be more effective than an elaborate and well-drawn character!

Further reading

McCloud S. (2004), *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* Harper Collins.
Roam D. (2008), *The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures,* Portfolio.
Brandt R.C. (1989), *Flip Charts: How to draw them and how to use them,* Pfeiffer.
Sibbet D. (2010), *Visual Meetings: How graphics, sticky notes & idea mapping can transform group productivity,* Wiley, John and Sons.