Beliefs

If you're asked to close your eyes and silently repeat the phrase "visual culture" to yourself, what images pass through your mind? Do you see an object from a culture other than your own? Does a bit of video advertising flit across your inner vision? Or perhaps the billboard you passed while driving down the highway earlier today? Or do you see the flamboyant jewelry worn by a colleague? Whatever images you conjure up, this chapter is designed to provide strategies to reveal beliefs held about visual representations of culture.

For many years, general education was heavily influenced by behavioral psychology. Teacher educators often presented behavior as the key indicator of learning. While behaviorism was at its peak in the public school sector, social psychologists were proposing models to explain the underlying roots of behavior. In one such model, it was proposed that behaviors flow from *intentions* that are shaped by *attitudes* that grow out of *belief*.[1] Further, according to this model, if behavior is to be changed in any lasting way, belief must be addressed. The advocate of this theory, psychologist Martin Fishbein, suggested that the interception point at which belief could be influenced was knowledge. New information motivates examination of belief, attitude, intention, and finally, behavior.

Parallel to general education and social psychological perspectives, cultural theorists have also addressed the ways in which belief influences what we see.[2] If we are willing to accept the premise that what we believe about the world in general and the visual world specifically sets the context for all interaction with visual culture, then a good way to begin learning about visual culture is to articulate our beliefs.

But how can we encourage students to examine belief? Very young students may not understand the concept of belief. Older students may vehemently say, "I don't know what I believe." Or they may shrug and say, "I don't believe anything." Either of these responses might be translated as "I am unwilling to risk sharing my beliefs with you." Yet it is our contention that a key element to understanding the meanings of visual culture is to reveal invisible beliefs.

Expose: Actively Examining Beliefs

To begin an exploration of visual culture, an active approach is most appropriate. Our actions reveal our beliefs and values, as much as what we say. The ever-evolving and pervasive visual environment is certainly not passive, nor are its messages neutral. Thus, learners can be encouraged to make visual objects that reveal belief and meaning. We have found that a good place to begin is to create a deceptively simple but revealing piece of visual communication. This created image will reveal a range of individual and shared beliefs and values that filter visual experience.

A Draw a Chair Activity

Something as basic as a simple drawing of a chair can communicate volumes about a person's beliefs and understandings. *Chair* is a concrete construct shared by all people, part of everyone's day-to-day experience. Yet chairs are so pervasive that we have likely never taken the time to examine them as an element of visual culture that, on a daily basis, can easily influence and affect behavior. The task described in the "Draw a Chair" sidebar on page 3 will serve as a focal point for this chapter. Because we believe active engagement in the task will reveal insights that are inaccessible by passive reading, we encourage readers to complete the activity as described before proceeding.

When a group of children, young people, or adults is instructed to draw a chair, a surprisingly consistent set of phenomena occurs. First, participants will do the exercise with little protest. Even if they are doubtful about the point of the exercise or unsure of their drawing skills, they will find a solution to the problem because a workable solution is within the grasp of almost anyone.

Once the chairs are drawn, the secret to both the fun and learning of this activity is what learners do with their drawings. Imagine a class of buzzing young people moving around the room holding their chair drawings up to their foreheads, following the instruction to do so in order to find others whose chairs are like theirs. We have asked more than a hundred people at a time to engage in this activity in this manner. Yes, it is chaotic, but it is constructive chaos. Participants examine one another's drawings closely, engaging in focused dialogue.

Groups form with some facilitator prodding. For example, shy students are encouraged to get out of their seats and earnestly look for chairs like theirs. Or, if a forming group of similar chairs is too large to support productive interaction, the facilitator asks that group to subdivide, based on some finer characteristic of their drawings.

Chair Categories

A second consistent phenomenon is that groups usually sort according to categories of chairs that look something like those shown in Figure 1.1.

These chair groups might be described as follows:

Cozy chairs are representations of easy chairs, overstuffed chairs, or recliners. A strategy used by the artist to accomplish the task might be: "I created the chair I would like to be sitting in right now" or "I wanted to create a chair that would be comfortable." This response is often accompanied by a reaction or feeling of well-being and satisfaction with the drawing.

Activity: Draw a Chair

In the space provided, draw a chair. Take no more than five minutes. Then answer the questions that follow.

What strategy did you employ to accomplish this task? Write your answer below.

_____

_____

_____

How did you react to the task? How did it feel to complete it? Write your answer below.

_____

_____

_____

Look at the selection of chair drawings in Appendix B (page 141). Can you identify a set of chairs similar to yours? If you were to name the set of similar chairs, what would it be called?

_____

Look at the chairs in Figure 1.1. Think about whether your chair fits into one of these categories. Does your chair drawing show a similar drawing strategy or reflect similar feelings?