

## Book Review

# ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION & THE VISUAL MESSAGE A Cross Cultural Perspective

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*Environmental Education and The Visual Message* is about communication between people; what is the nature of communication, how human beings communicate best between one another, especially between cultures, languages and ideologies.

Although it is impossible to demarcate one form of communication from all others, the book focuses heavily on visual communication. Ratner puts forward guidelines and strategies to assist environmental educators in the conception and production of visual materials which effectively communicate the intended message. In so far that it does this, Ratner's manual is a useful publication.

The author seeks to bring an awareness to environmental educators that visual messages are perceived differently by different people and groups of people. She says, and I would agree, "a picture is 'worth a thousand words', but only if the message maker and the intended audience speak the same visual language" (p 7).

The stated goal of the text is "to promote a visual design process that is sensitive to cultural differences". The specific objectives as stated are:

- 1 to present the conceptual considerations important to cross-cultural design,
- 2 to provide a design framework and guidelines for assessing and planning visual messages in cross-cultural situations and
- 3 to encourage a dialogue between environmental educators concerning cross-cultural visual design (Ratner, p.7).

The manual is organised into three parts:

- 1 Building a Theoretical Foundation
- 2 A Cross-cultural Design Framework

3 Beyond these pages

which correlate to the objectives stated above.

Part 1, Building a Theoretical Foundation, assumes that effective communication results when audience characteristics and task requirements are brought together in balance by a visual message. This section treats the theory behind cross-cultural perceptions.

In the light of the environmental education's stated principle "think globally, act locally" and the realisation that the solution to global problems can only come about by global awareness, communication and personal action, it is paramount that environmental educators are aware of differences between cultures.

Ratner writes convincingly, and with much support from the current literature, that our environment and environmental problems are culturally, socially and context dependent - that "we see only what our culture has conditioned us to see" (Ratner, p. 14).

Many practical examples highlight different people's differing perceptions of reality, in this case visual stimuli. A myriad of examples and quotes from interviewees gives the reader concrete examples to reinforce the explored theories. However, at times Ratner's writing appears disjointed, almost like a collection of others' opinions grouped together in some way.

Ratner recognises that many areas are 'touched on' in the book and there is no in-depth pursuit of single ideas. This certainly is the case, but on reading, it is the breadth of examples and topics 'touched on', such as environmental effects, spatial perception, literacy, selective attention, that reinforce the complexity of cross-cultural communication by drawing the readers' attention to the number and nature of variables that lie behind different perceptions.

Ratner stresses that when we "perceive our environments we see not only with our eyes but also with our minds ... We perceive our environments through a cultural veil" (Ratner, p. 37). Of particular importance is a culture's "world view". Which stimulus is perceived, and what responses are forthcoming are ultimately determined by the often 'taken for granted' world view of individuals within a culture. According to Kluckoln (in Ratner, p. 29) world views can be categorised into three general beliefs:

- 1 People have the power to dominate nature.
- 2 People are subservient to the forces and whims of nature.
- 3 People are an inseparable part of nature.

The book fleshes out these ideas in a very readable, succinct and simple manner. If the reader is enlightened and prompted to reflect on the issues raised, and I anticipate many would, then Ratner has made considerable progress towards

improving the effective communication of those who read *Environmental Education and The Visual Message*.

Although Ratner expounds the problematic nature of communication, cross-cultural perspectives and the conception, production and implementation of visual messages, 'Building a Theoretical Foundation' is devoid of similar insight with respect to education, in particular environmental education, and environmental educators.

The work assumes that education is a vehicle for change and that education is the way people communicate from one generation to the next. The basic premise of the manual is that "Environmental educators are agents of change, working to improve the quality of life on this planet" (p. 152). Assumptions having been made, Ratner's work highlights the acute lack of understanding of a cohesive and detailed environmental education philosophy. Such a philosophy would regard environmental education as having its own set of detailed and particular needs, values and principles.

According to Ratner "Environmental educators are working to get teachers to integrate environmental messages into subjects that they are already teaching such as science or social studies. These are examples in which the environmental message does not stand alone but rather infiltrates another message that may or may not be related." Although this is not seen as the only way to incorporate environmental issues into the school curriculum, Ratner substantially sees environmental education as integration and does not recognise the problematic nature of, to use her own terms, 'conveyance' and 'technical carrier' of environmental education in educational institutions, particularly schools.

Ratner regards the educational process as similar to the market place, and to be dealt with along similar lines. Environmental education issues are seen as needing similar strategies for marketing as any other product requiring promotion, except that she refers to the process as social marketing and states that it seeks more important changes than product marketing by virtue of the fact that it promotes behavioural change.

The environmental educator, referred to as an 'outside agent', has the 'power' to initiate change, (cognitive, value and behavioural) by marketing. The manual suggests that if the 'change agent' supplies the appropriate stimuli, then change will be effected. Can education be thought of in this way? Are we still naive enough to think of education as simplistically as this? Is there universal agreement about the content and methodology of environmental education? What is the desirable environmental direction to take?

The weakness of the book is that although Ratner problematises the nature of audience and visual messages she does NOT problematise the nature and content of environmental education, and leaves uncritiqued the role of the environmental educator.

For those who support the psycho-statistical paradigm, Ratner's prescription of successful marketing for change will fit comfortably, if not, then

one may have difficulty with her approach. However, if one is of the latter persuasion, all is not lost. Much of Ratner's work is relevant, important and interesting reading which may shed light, perhaps unintentionally, on the problematic nature of environmental education.

The manual draws on a variety of disciplines such as eco-psychology, sociology, visual anthropology, and a blend of methodologies, from psycho-statistical to anthropological, to confer credibility.

Part II, A Cross-cultural Design Framework, looks at a variety of visual messages from the written word, photography, video, and sketch to dance and puppetry. This section is full of ideas for delivering 'the message' and takes into account restraints such as budget, printing facilities, and the like. It includes a host of 'tips and tricks' for production of visual messages such as pictorial materials, instructional films, and puppet performances.

Inclusion of charts which summarise possible considerations in visual message communication is useful. Chapter 8 'Guidelines' succinctly summarises the earlier 7 chapters and makes the distinction between guidelines for non-literate audiences and general guidelines.

The presentation of the book, such as layout, use of chapter icons, symbols, diagrams and photography support the theory underpinning the text. The use of many examples and analogies reduces the margin of misinterpretation and concretises the writer's ideas.

Part III, Beyond These Pages, includes lists of resources in the form of annotated publications and organisations. This is useful however, all organisations listed are peculiar to the U.S.A. Environmental educators are encouraged to engage in dialogue through workshops, training sessions or by communicating with the author.

The intent of the document, that it be "a guide for developing effective visual messages [for] primarily professionals who train environmental educators and natural resource communicators" is realised by *Environmental Education and The Visual Message*.

In essence I don't feel that Ratner has anything new to say but the breadth of information collected and its presentation is a 'time saver' for anyone wanting a brief overview and sound directional advice on producing and implementing an environmental message using visual media.

The work is useful not only for environmental educators but anyone whose profession or interest is in visual communication for whatever purpose – marketing, advertising, curriculum development, public relations – and as such makes a sound contribution to the literature in these fields.