

Students' Reflection on the Implementation of Visual Communication and Photography Online Course

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Abstract

This study aims to unveil the students' experience, more specifically their change and growth, during the visual communication and photography course conducted online in the Communication Sciences Program, Universitas Padjadjaran. A qualitative analysis of reflective portfolio assignments at the end of the semester provided insights into students' learning experience, change, and growth. In addition, midsemester feedback evaluation forms were analyzed to identify the negative experience faced during the course. Thematic analysis reveals that the students' changes center around cognitive and affective dimensions. In the cognitive dimension, students expressed developing more understanding of visual communication and photography basic concepts, including how messages are communicated visually. Affectively, students reported that they learned to appreciate themselves and others; and gained more interest in the subject area. However, they also pointed out that the duration of the online lectures needs to be reconsidered. These results highlight the benefits of taking visual communication and photography online course and point to ways in which it could be improved to meet the students' needs.

Keywords: Visual Communication, Photography, Online Learning, Students' Reflections

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past years, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced online learning to be the main medium to conduct teaching and learning. In Universitas Padjadjaran, this applies to all courses offered, whether it contains theoretical or practical learning. In the Faculty of Communication Sciences, one of the challenging courses to be delivered online is Visual Communication and Photography. The aim of the course is to develop students' basic understanding of how humans process visual messages creatively, as part of the communication process. By the end of the course, it is expected that the students can become more effective communicators. In order to reach the goal, the course consists of a balanced portion of in class session online lectures and independent practical activities. A broad range of materials that are delivered include the history of visual communication, visual perception process, design elements, typography, composition and layout, gestalt and semiotic theories, and basic photography as well as digital imaging. These materials are applied in various contexts such as education and entrepreneurship.

In the past few decades, the discussion of visual communication instructional method has assumed a face-to-face classroom interaction (see [1]). Furthermore, Lauer [2] has highlighted the resistance to take graphic design fields online. This is mainly because the instructors perceive that there it will affect the instructor's ability to mentor the students. Another study conducted by Chan [3] emphasised that when developing an art course online, several issues emerged including the online course design development approaches, visual design, team collaboration, and interactions during online course. Similarly, in a study

conducted in an Indonesian University during the Covid-19 pandemic, Adriyanto et al. [4] found that interactions during an online course was also an issue, whereas in fact, interactivity makes students more satisfied with their learning process [5].

On the other hand, amongst the few studies related to visual communication design education, Ishizaki et al. [6] have documented the possibility to conduct the courses online. They suggested that it is possible to teach college students certain visual design skills through self-learning online tutorial without an instructor, even for those who have no previous visual design training. However, literature regarding visual communication design pedagogy is still lacking, especially about how the students' experience the teaching and learning process.

Thus, this study aims to unveil the students' experience, more specifically their growth and change during the online course. It is expected that the faculty members would gain insights so that they can design a better course to facilitate the students' learning process.

2. METHOD

A qualitative approach was used in this research to unravel the students' experience during the course. The data collection was gathered in 2021 through students' written reflections embedded in their portfolio project at the end of the semester. This provided insights into students' learning experience, change, and growth. In addition, midsemester feedback evaluation forms were analysed to identify the negative experience faced during the course.

The sample of the study were the first-year students in one of the classes of the Communication Studies Program. Amongst 37 submitted portfolios, only 36 were taken into consideration because the other 2 did not contain any written reflections. The reflections were coded and analysed.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Course Overview

In the Faculty of Communication Sciences, the Visual Communication and Photography course is a mandatory course offered to first-year students of the Communication Sciences Program. It is a 4-credit-course which consists of 200 minutes of learning per week. There are 16 sessions throughout the semester conducted in the afternoon. Mainly, the online live lectures delivered through Zoom usually lasts for 150 minutes with challenging practical activities within the session or after it. The teaching and learning process is also supported by LIVE Unpad, a learning management system which is used to put in course materials and students' assessment. The assessments consist of quizzes, projects, group work, presentations, and online discussion forums. In addition, at the end of the semester, students are required to submit a portfolio and work in teams to curate and create a virtual exhibition using Art Steps. The portfolio consists of students' best work throughout the semester, and a reflection at the end, which were analysed afterwards.

3.2 Students Experience, Change, and Growth

After analyzing the data, several themes emerged highlighting students' experience, change, and growth during the Visual Communication and Photography course. Thematic analysis reveals that the students' changes centre around cognitive and affective dimensions.

Regarding the cognitive dimension, most students pointed out that throughout the online course, they experienced growth in conceptual knowledge. Conceptual knowledge is related to how basic elements are related to one another to function together [7]. First, students gained more understanding in how messages are communicated visually, through visual elements and photography, as expressed through these comments:

"My eyes become more open in this field. [Now, I understand] how colors, photographs, and lines talk [sic]." –A05

"At first, art was just something that looks beautiful, now it has changed as it is not only beautiful but also meaningful. We can communicate through sketches, [and photos captured through] cameras." –A23

Second, students perceived that they have learnt new concepts such as design principles, typography, colour wheel, white space, golden ratio, and composition types.

Besides experiencing growth in conceptual knowledge, students also undergo change in procedural knowledge, especially the *"tips and tricks"* of photography techniques. Some students just realized that there are a lot of techniques that need to be mastered, including lighting techniques and how to take pictures from different angles to make photos more interesting. In addition to photography techniques, students also learnt about things to consider while designing a logo, as a student stated, *"Apparently, a logo not only has to represent one's identity, but it must also be simple enough to be memorable, timeless so that it can be used for a long time, and scalable to suit the shape and needs of certain platforms."*

The affective dimension is the second area of students' growth. Throughout the online course, change was experienced in how students appreciate themselves, as reflected in this comment:

"I've learnt how to appreciate and enjoy every single process in developing my potential [...] I've learnt how to appreciate my progress [...] until finally I can make a portfolio of my work over the six months. Even if mine isn't as good as others, at least I have tried to do my best [...]" – A12

Moreover, some students also highlighted that they started to appreciate other people, including their classmates and those who work in the creative industry, since they became aware that things that look simple might have undergone a complex process. A few students stated that they started to appreciate the details that creative products have.

In addition to learning to appreciate others, a number of students also gained more interest in the area of visual communication and photography. Some students mentioned that it facilitates their hobby and passion while others stated that they have started to be interested in the subject area. Interestingly, a student emphasised on the self-confidence he developed after taking the online course, as he said, *"Visual communication and photography classes also helped in [increasing] my [self-]confidence, so now I am quite confident in sharing my works on social media. "*

While the students' reflections centre on growth in cognitive and affective dimensions, growth in psychomotor dimension is rarely mentioned. Even though a student mentioned that he has started to gain skills in using a software, it seems that it could not be attributed to the growth gained through taking the visual communication and photography online course. In fact, the use of software was not taught during in-class sessions. The lack of reflections emphasising growth in the psychomotor dimension might be because of the lack of mentoring sessions targeting skill development during practical activities.

As the reflections unveiled the students' positive experience, the analysis of midterm feedback forms stressed the negative experience faced. The students considered the course duration as too long. Moreover, some students felt sleepy during the course as it is conducted in the afternoon. The negative experience felt by the students might be because of the lack of the lecturers' experience on how to design an effective online course.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

As a conclusion, this study reveals that the students' experience, change, and growth centre around cognitive and affective dimensions. In the cognitive dimension, students expressed developing more understanding of visual communication and photography basic concepts, including how messages are communicated visually. Affectively, students reported that they learned to appreciate themselves and others; and gained more interest in the subject area. However, they also pointed out that the duration of the online lectures needs to be reconsidered.

Although the students benefit from taking the visual communication and photography online course, it is recommended that a different approach is used in the upcoming course. Several steps might be considered to reach the course aims and meet the students' needs. These include varying delivery methods, designing shorter sessions, and offering mentoring sessions to develop the students' skills further.

5. REFERENCES

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