

Cognitive Empowerment

Kamal Oghly

The International Cultural Academy, Syria

Abstract

Due to the exceptional situation left by the war in Syria, a huge number of Syrian refugees are lacking the proper education. As a result, the International Cultural Academy has decided to take the initiative to design a special program based on the elements and tools of visual language to help these refugees raise their awareness and capabilities and thus compensate for the severe shortage in the knowledge field. This training program is designed in an unconventional way, so that it is dealt with interactively, and there is still a room for development. We started working on this program short time ago relatively, through workshops that included refugee women from several countries, and the result was very positive, but we still need more time so that we can evaluate performance and accurately monitor the results.

Keywords: Visual Literacy, Visual Language, Education for Syrian Refugees.

Introduction

Since the beginning of my professional photography, I raised the slogan of spreading the culture of the image. I worked and participated in many exhibitions inside and outside Syria. I was keen to participate in festivals in particular because the viewership rate is high due to the large numbers of visitors, which achieves the goal of the slogan that I raised since the beginning of my profession. When I moved to Turkey due to the war in Syria at the beginning of 2014, I started thinking about how I could be useful and help refugees in general and Syrian refugees in particular.

Before I started my journey with visual training, I observed the general situation and researched the problems related to education. The idea of visual education came first, through the beginning of my work in 2015 in a humanitarian organization called (Al-Sinkari Foundation for Humanitarian Works, which later became "Onder Organization"). It had several development projects aimed at helping Syrian refugees. It also held training courses in several cultural, artistic, and sports fields, including a training program on photography. The organization commissioned me to establish the photography program based on their knowledge of my experience of more than 35 years in the field of photography.

I did not want to teach the traditional program for photography because I felt that I would not add anything new to this field. Especially since anyone who wants to learn photography techniques can learn that easily through the Internet where there are thousands of videos about this subject. So I thought of a more useful job which is a training program that would integrate teaching photography techniques with the rest of the cognitive visual education tools, and create a simplified program for training. It was based on my experience in documentary photography. The fact that this type of imaging is intertwined with all topics related to all walks of life will make it unique and add more value than traditional photography programs.

I had several challenges with this program, which is identifying the appropriate segments and age groups. Bearing in mind that the logistical possibilities were limited, and we could not train all those who needed it. In addition, there are very few organizations specialized in these programs especially photography, and the courses were short, unsustainable, and did not achieve the desired benefit.

Therefore, and based on these data and information, I began to work and was able to identify two things: 1) The segment most in need of education; and 2) Creating a new method for training for the new program. However, two of the most peculiar challenges were historical and unusual.

Part One (The Historical)

Since the mid-sixties of the last century, educational curricula in Syria and at all schools and universities levels have only been developed or renewed to a very small extent, with a complete absence of visual development in terms of explanations within schools or educational books in general.

Even the new information that is supposed to be constantly updated within the purely scientific materials was not updated in the way it was supposed to be.

For example, in many countries, educational curricula are modified almost every year, according to scientific developments and new discoveries for each subject taught in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and natural sciences. However, it did not happen in Syria, and it led to that me and my son having studied the same curricula with an updated difference of no more than 5% for all the subjects I mentioned earlier.

In addition, there are no pictures, charts, or any graphs within the book for any of the important scientific materials explaining the subject to be taught, and if any it is poorly printed and colorless.

Likewise, there is no development of educational methods or models. For example, the math or science teacher and through their entire teaching career will not undergo any courses to develop his/her teaching methods, and no modern experiences are added. Thus, the situation remains as it is, and unfortunately it is not only limited to the teaching field but across all fields even with sensitive professions like doctors.

Of course, all of what was previously mentioned applies in one way or another to most Arabic-speaking countries in varying degrees. The general line of education is almost the same for everyone as backward indoctrination education systems, devoid of any visual culture as well.

All the prestigious universities in the Arabic-speaking countries, such as Damascus University, Cairo University and Baghdad University, have lost much of their scientific status as an academic classification during the past 50 years. Almost all of them have sank to the bottom of the global ranking of universities worldwide. It is even mentioned in the periodic annual reports issued by United Nations organizations in this regard, for example there are 6 Arabic-speaking countries are outside the education quality table: Iraq - Libya - Sudan - Yemen - Somalia - Syria.

Part Two (The Unusual)

After the popular uprising for change, democracy, and the creation of decent livelihoods for people started in 2011 in Syria that was followed by the war. Millions of Syrians were displaced inside and outside Syria. Over 6 million of them left the country mainly for neighboring countries like Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon in addition to several other European and non-European countries.

Turkey had the largest share of these forced refugees, and their number has reached approximately 3,600,000 refugees so far according to the latest statistics of the United Nations in 2020, distributed among all Turkish regions and cities.

We can see the extent of the problem with this huge number of war victims. These victims need all the necessities of life including food, housing, social services, health, education, and means of integration to adapt and get used to their new life and integrate with the host society.

Despite all the efforts of the Turkish government to help these refugees, many problems have not been resolved. The most important one is finding job opportunities for those who are able to work (most of them are young people with incomplete education). The other important problem is the inability to secure educational opportunities for everyone due to administrative reasons related to the regulations and laws of the Turkish government on the one hand, and the lack of interest in education among good segment of refugees on the other hand.

The most difficult barrier for all of these refugees was the language barrier. Despite the commitment of a large segment of them to education, but many of them were also unable to learn until, and from different age groups especially women for several reasons mostly economical and social.

The social ones are related to customs, traditions, inhibitions, and taboos which still strongly control the Syrian refugee communities.

Hence, everyone had to work to find solutions to this intractable problem, and despite the presence of many humanitarian organizations that responded to help find a solution to this problem, almost everyone failed and could not achieve any real and tangible success.

Visual Training Program Phase I

My work on the training project started on 01/04/2015. At that time, I started preparing a detailed and integrated project plan. I wanted to combine visual culture with conventional education in photographic techniques.

The preparation period took about 20 days, and this of course was not enough time to prepare a project like this, but it was enough for the beginning, and then building and completing what was missing later.

I continued gradually working on building the program, and every time I finished one stage I moved to another stage. The duration of each stage is three months, and each new stage is linked to the previous stage in terms of basic information, which came extensively in the later stage.

As a final result of that period, a visual training curriculum based on an academic basis was established based on an unconventional group interactive method with the primary goal being capacity development. The program information was as the following:

- A class with 25 students maximum between 15 and 25 years of age.
- Work on this program started on 20/04/2015
- The duration of the program for one stage is 3 months
- 3 hours per day, 6 days a week, during the summer.
- 6 hours per day, on weekends during schools.
- The largest number of students came to us during the summer holidays, and was divided into two groups.
- The materials included in the tutorial schedule were as follow:
 - Photography training classes
 - Photoshop training sessions
 - Psychological support classes based on photography as a support material (for students who came from war zones)
 - Life skills development and teamwork training
 - Practical photography sessions inside and outside the classroom
 - Various excursion classes that include different places such as:(Museums - archaeological sites - libraries - old neighborhoods and markets)

After the first stage, the second, third, and four stages were designed and developed, which included advanced information in all program subjects. Following the basic stages, there were different qualitative stages that included different topics for the students who went through the whole program.

The graduation project for any stage of the program was an exhibition and a documentary film on a specific topic to be worked on in the last two weeks for each stage. Of course, the subject of each stage was commensurate with the technical and cognitive level reached by the students and differed according to the stage. The subjects of the exhibitions were varied and included nature, heritage, archaeological sites, and portraits. I must add also that I noticed the passion of this age group for learning photography, and the exceptional ability to absorb and learn.

I work on this program until June, 15, 2019, because the organization decided to reduce the budget and stop all programs inside Turkey for logistical reasons.

Immediately after that, I received a grant from Baytna Syria for a period of three months from 20-06-2019 until 20-09-2019 to do a visual project with a group of Syrian youth all of whom were my former students.

The topic and title of the project, Brilliant Souls, was determined by the students (*Empowering Syrian Civil Society*, n.d.). It represented the situation of Syrian children and the extent of their suffering in the countries of asylum, and the launch of a symbolic global message to help them.

The project was implemented on time and the result was a photographic exhibition executed by the group in a wonderful and professional artistic way, which generated a very good positive echo among Syrians and Turks. In addition, many Syrian and Turkish media and social media covered the exhibition's activities. However, due to the emerge of Covid-19 epidemic, work and physical contact stopped, and I had to pause work the training program.

Visual Training Program Phase II (Renamed later to Visual Literacy Program)

After the work stopped physically, I began to think about finding a training program that could be conducted either physically or online. The program would be broader in knowledge with greater benefit. I also considered publishing the program to reach as many people as possible especially youth of both sexes, and women in particular.

In late 2019, an agreement was reached between me and a friend residing in Germany to establish a cultural academy that conducts international artistic and social development activities, with the aim of exchanging cultures, artistic knowledge, and experiences between peoples of different backgrounds. In addition, it will help integrate immigrants and refugees into their new societies.

Indeed, the International Cultural Academy was established through a specialized team, and various work programs were designed, including photography, theater, cinema, plastic art, caricature, story, poetry, and human development.

Among the tasks entrusted to me was the design of a visual technical educational program for the Academy, which helps to raise the cognitive abilities. Meanwhile, at the beginning of 2020, I worked on another project through a six-month grant, with a cultural entity called Cultural Spaces supported by several European and Turkish parties and led by the German Goethe Institute.

Through this project, I began to thoroughly experiment with this program, and to develop it theoretically and practically. For detailed information about the project (see Appendix)

Summary

Through our goals in the International Cultural Academy in general and the Visual Literacy Program in particular, we always strive to develop our cognitive skills in a sustainable manner, and to provide the latest information to our students. Our main target is young people of both sexes in the first place. They are the least fortunate segment of the refugees in obtaining education and knowledge, and we hope to achieve this goal.

References

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Appendix

General information about the project:

- The project was implemented with a group of refugee youth of different nationalities: (Syrians - Iraqis - Palestinians - Yemenis - Somalis - and Turks)
- The number of participants were 85 young women and men.
- The topic and title were chosen by the participating group, "Eye in the Eye".
- Project topic: The extent to which refugees are integrated and adapted to their new communities (pros and cons).
- The output of the project was a virtual photographic exhibition, executed symbolically through the type of silhouette photography, which gained more than 8000 views (*Eye in the eye*, n.d.).

After conducting the program I and the supervising team decided to expand the program and make it more comprehensive. We named the program "Capacity Building With Light (Abstract Awareness)" and agreed to divide the program into two parts:

- The first part: an artistic educational channel on YouTube, which works to spread visual awareness in several ways.
- The second part: A training program for visual literacy based on scientific materials designed to raise cognitive abilities and intellectual skills, and to develop positive visual awareness that helps develop thinking, behavior, and problems solving skills.

Phases of the Project

1- Youtube Channel (Phase 1)

I have studied and prepared the type of materials, style, topics and method that I am going to present. I also studied similar materials and programs and started the channel on 01/16/2020. The goal of creating the channel is to spread visual awareness through cognitive, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic principles.

The episodes were divided into three main categories, educational, cultural, and introductory. The educational episodes included different lessons to teach techniques and types of photography, and later video shooting, and cinematography. Cultural episodes were concerned with teaching understanding and reading the image in various fields. While the introductory episodes were about artistic experiences of Syrian, Arab and foreign photographers, who have various artistic experiences in various types of photography, which contribute to raising the artistic and aesthetic taste of the recipient by watching different creations, and from different cultures that add a lot to the viewers' cognitive experiences in the visual field.

2- Training Program (Phase 2)

The training program curricula consisted the following chapters:

Chapter One (Visual Language):

- Define visual language.
- The psychological, educational and educational dimension.
- Requirements for learning visual language.

Chapter Two (Units, Elements and Tools of Visual Language)

Chapter Three: The Light.

- Light concept.
- Types of light.

Chapter Four: Color Theory (the concept of color and its connotations in all aspects of life).

- The color wheel: concept and meaning
- Psychological meaning of colors.

Chapter Five: The Concept of Composition

Chapter Six: Body language.

Chapter Seven: Symbolism, Indirection, and Suggestion

Chapter Eight: The Conceptual Picture

So far, the program has been tested on two women's groups with promising results, and the program is still ongoing as pilot program for the coming periods to monitor and measure the results and the benefits.

Results of the project:

1- Phase 1 Results (Youtube Channel):

- The number of episodes of various content reached over 100 episodes.
- The number of views of the channel has reached over 62,000

2- Phase 2 Results (Training Program):

- The number of the beneficiaries of this training program during the period from 20-04-2015 until now has reached 483 male and female students, the percentage of females is 67%.
- The success rate achieved according to the educational standards set is 84%.
- Most of the students entered universities in various branches, with a number of academically superior students even over local Turkish students at the level of Turkish states.
- The groups consisted of Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Yemeni and Somali refugee students in Turkey.
- Many students are still practicing different artistic activities in the field of visual arts, including drawing, photography and cinema.
- The program was also introduced online for 60 refugee women of different nationalities and countries of asylum (Syrian - Palestinian - Kurdish - Iraqi - Sudanese - Eritrean - Somali)

What is required to continue developing this program in a sustainable manner?

- Finding information, experiences, and academic researches that can add new values to the program.
- Creating modern and tested cognitive tools and functions for the program.
- Creating quick and effective virtual means of publishing that achieve the goal with a great benefit.
- Generating new ideas that are practical and easy to understand.
- Finding sustainable financial support for the continuity of the program.