

**Gender Sensitivity in Illustrations
for textbooks and Educational Material
– A holistic approach
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Paper Presentation

National Consultation on Using Visuals as a Pedagogical Aid for Gender Sensitivity, Department of Women's studies (NCERT) & Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi, 18th Feb 2011

Introduction

Gender Sensitivity in Illustrations for educational media is a topic that has a lot of gray areas. Each time, I hold responsibility to create a new illustration and visualize a new character; I ask myself these questions time and again.

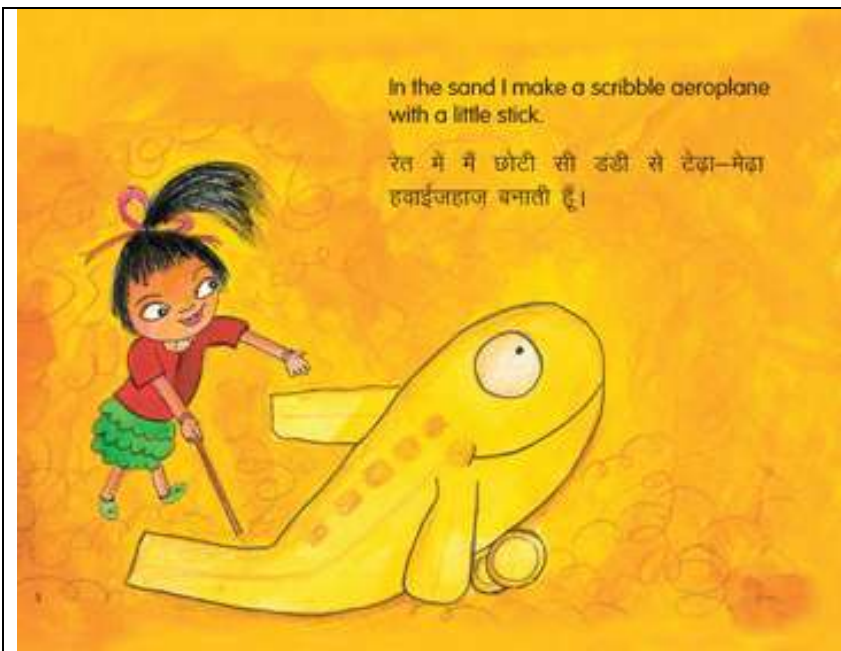
- **How do we define a girl or a woman?**
- **And who are the “we” who are defining?**
- **Who are the “they” who are interpreting it?**

Based on these three questions, I have found the need to delve into a much larger space of thinking in order to understand the complications and possible solutions that are needed in this area. Having worked as an artist, writer and educator, I find that there is a strong need for an interdisciplinary approach to how we think about visualizing in the educational field. This presentation looks at possible areas of thoughts, questions, some sample art work and a few suggestions for way forward.

The presentation is divided into six sections – Visualization and Interpretation, Visualisation and Interpretation, Artist’s Role and Artist’s Brief, Language and Visualisation, Media Education and competition, Identity Building and Generational Definition of Roles, Pedagogy of Visualization/ Visualization in pedagogy. Each section raises questions, and creates a space for reflection and deeper thinking.

Visualisation and Interpretation

How does the artist visualize any subject or topic and how is the work interpreted by his/her audience? Take a moment to look at the pictures given below. Reflect on how your mind works and how the visual feeds into the tiny journey of interpretation that you are taking.



I am going to take two scenarios and ask questions. In the first one, my questions are those of an artist.

For instance, in the first scenario, if I draw a girl in colourful skirts/salwar Kameez with earrings and other jewellery versus a girl in jeans/ pants/ shorts -

- Am I empowering the girl character or stereotyping her?
- Am I making her feel comfortable in her femininity or holding her onto a traditional male gaze?
- If I draw her in jeans and pants, am I liberating her or forcing her to fit into the male world?
- In both these cases of visualization, am I also creating a contradiction between a traditional girl and a modern girl?

Let's take an alternative, a second scenario; here my questions are as an educator –

If I am representing a boy cooking in the kitchen in an Indian scenario

- Are we as educators hoping that boys will take the idea that cooking is fun, anyone can do it?
- Are we as educators hoping that girls will respond to this idea positively and look at boys as equal contributors within the home system?
- Are we prepared to see the possibility that boys with their stereotypical ideas might make fun of this image as well as create a peer pressure scenario on other boys who may be interested in experimenting?
- Are we prepared for the possibility that girls with stereotypical ideas about boys, find this image funny and make fun of the boys who want to experiment with cooking?
- Are we prepared for to see that peer pressure can be a big deterrent in boys or girls choosing to experiment with their roles?



These two scenarios are a very simple consideration and only one of the many gender related questions. However, it is essential to see that there is a gap between how an artist may visualize and how the audience may interpret a character or scenario based on a number of reasons that include the society and cultural influences, individual experiences, media influences,

differences in personal values etc. Hence, it is important to understand that the artist's role is critical and complex. Equally complex and important is an understanding of the audience. With relevance to creating educational content at a national level, we are dealing with a varied audience, who come from different religious, social and economic backgrounds. We are talking to people with different beliefs, values and cultural backgrounds. So the key question is what is it that we are really trying to visualize in terms of gender sensitivity?

Are we talking about representation of male and female characters in terms of numbers, in terms of professions, in terms of leadership positions?

What is the level of depth we are talking about when we say visualization- are we talking about character and quality traits like confidence, equality, assertiveness, leadership?

Are we talking about traditional or modern role-models? How are we differentiating, defining and representing these in qualitative, descriptive manner?

Again taking a visual scenario for an example, when an artist illustrates a grocery store scene, does he depict the store manager as a woman/ man? What clothes should they wear? How many people will be buying from the store? Who will be in charge of purchasing daily requirements for a home in this shop? Is the artist aware that he/she is engaging in an intense and intricate gender exercise in making these decisions?

Artist's Role and Artist's Brief

Is the artist sufficiently informed to create illustrations?

Is the artist involved in the entire visualisation process and how clear is the brief that he/she receives?

How is the artist's role visualized in the development of educational content?

In the Indian scene, the artist is often the last person to come on board and is usually given a very tight timeline to work with. Most often it is assumed that since the "difficult" work, which is conceptualizing and writing has already been completed, the artist should have no problem. So they can turn anything around overnight. Unfortunately this is a very limited and uninformed view on the artist's work and the nature of time it takes to create good quality work. Visualizing a character is like giving life to a character and it often takes time and energy to really create the right character to represent a story

or a situation. To create complex scenes where an artist thinks through gender roles, social and religious equality etc., while retaining the essence of reality is also a tough and delicate job. Hence, it is important to provide the artist with substantial time and a larger role in the visualization process. It can make a huge difference to have an artists and writers' workshop before the actual content development process begins. This can be a great place for artists and writers to share their concepts, approach to work, ideas and differences of opinion in a healthy and constructive manner. And the whole question Workshops at regular interval during the conceptual development process will give the artists substantial time to think through their artistic philosophy, approach, technique and style for the final product, be it a book or a series of educational products.

The second aspect of the artist's role deals with the brief he/she receives. When we create a textbook especially for an organization like NCERT, the books go across rural areas, small towns as well as cities. The target audience is vast, varied and come from extremely different backgrounds. At this point, the artist has no clear idea



of who he/she is addressing. So it is important that as a team, a decision is made to create a clear brief which defines what is expected from the artist and how the entire book is to be visualized, as well as how each section/ chapter is to be visualized.

Defining the artist's role and making the artist an integral part of the content development process is an important step in ensuring gender sensitivity in the visualization. The brief needs to clarify how gender sensitivity is to be defined visually and what are some of the key concerns that the artist needs to keep in mind.

Language and Visualization

Is the language complementing the visualization? How should gender sensitivity be approached in an interdisciplinary sense?



Language and visualization go hand in hand. For instance as an artist, according to my imagination and belief systems, I maybe creating a bold, dynamic young woman, and students due to their media exposure or social stereotyping may be reading her as an aggressive, competitive woman. While my interpretation may have been a positive role model, their interpretation could be a character with negative shades. So, unless the text complements the image and asserts her as a bold and vivacious young woman, there is a high chance of misinterpretation. The overall flow of content, the nuances of male-female roles throughout the text book/ any other product content need to be supportive of the illustrations. Also, as in the case of the artist's roles, it is essential to note that language and visualization need to be seen as an integral unit

and not as two diverse disciplines. The writers and artists can give each other exciting ideas that could complement each other's work.

Media Education and competition

Since students are exposed to a variety of media, as educational content producers are we competing in the media arena and are we substantially providing a space for good media education?

Textbooks are one of the primary ways in which we are reaching out to children. Videos, television programs, educational content on the internet are other media that we are looking at. However, it is a challenging space since children today are bombarded by a wide range of media. And gender roles in these media may be very different from how we are defining it within the academic sensibility.

In terms of quality, approach and packaging are we as content producers, exciting and strong enough for our students to look at academic material as a powerful source of gender sensitivity? Are we looking at our competition and paying attention the gender-roles that are being bombarded at our students? Who are the role-models that are our students are looking up to- are they film stars, politicians, characters of fiction, sports-stars or people from history and the past? Being in this mass media space with continually growing technologies, is it enough if we create visuals or should we also sensitize our students and teachers to the approach towards visuals?

Working with young teens and college students, I have found a constant need to challenge their presumptions and stereotypical images every time we discuss gender-related issues. In this phase of their life, young people are also looking out for love, romance and a partner. Practical experiences versus traditional beliefs, versus academic definitions create a challenging mixture where defining themselves as individuals and in relationship becomes a complex and demanding task. As part of visualizations, how do we really help them navigate this space? This question leads to the next section...



Identity Building and Generational Definition of Roles

What is it that we want to pass on to the new generation and how are we helping them define/ create identities?

Definitions of gender roles are constantly changing with time. Different sections of society are responding differently to the changes. However, each individual student, based on his/her socio-cultural background, experiences and context is constantly trying to create an identity that will help him/her fit into their peer group, grow in their career choices, help them relate to their environment. However, there can be a lot of conflict given that students have a lot of exposure and new ideas are constantly seeping into their lives. Globalization, Media exposure, a transforming nation, work cultures etc are providing them with new viewpoints on a constant basis. Within this context, what is it that we as content developers are looking to build in terms of gender-roles, gender-definitions? Do we have broad outlines or are we looking at a certain set of core values? This is again an interesting, complex and constantly shifting subject and hence a challenging aspect of visualization both textually and visually. What is that we want to pass on to the new generation and how are we responding to their changes, to their environment and challenges as a team? It is crucial that a certain set of ideas are generated in this context, because otherwise the artist's brief tends to become vague and his/her visualization process weakens and waters down to something that is neither bold nor realistic. It is also important for us to be involving children and young people in this process of co-creating the roles that they see themselves in and documenting their challenges and questions.



Pedagogy of Visualization/ Visualization in pedagogy

Going through some of the broad areas, the need to look at pedagogy of visualization for the artists and writers (content Developers) involved in this work and a visualization in pedagogy for teachers involved in using it in the classroom becomes important. Given the challenging nature of gender related questions, the possibility of varied personal interpretations of visuals, the bombardment of visual images across various media and the different social, religious and cultural backgrounds, it becomes important to find ways to address the gaps in reading, interpreting and understanding visuals in a conscious manner.

How are we teaching students to read visuals?

Are we buying into the cliché that “A picture is worth a thousand words” and expecting subliminal messages to be carried forth on gender equality and positive role modeling to students?

Do we realize there is a need to spend time to discuss the illustrations on a given page in spite of our tight schedules or curriculum plans?

How are teachers across our wide audience interpreting these visuals? Are our ideas modern or traditional? Are we acting as a moral conscience or as a conversational open space?, Are our teachers with us in this dialogue on gender sensitivity that we are creating or are they disconnected to the visuals on the page, looking at them as a decorative aspect?

Creating a pedagogy of visualization can be a key step in making a conscious step towards approaching gender sensitivity from various perspectives and angles.

The pedagogy needs to look at tradition and modernity, religious, social and cultural contexts, ideas of empowerment, strength, equality and expression, visual models, styles, techniques and approaches. It needs to be a document that is dynamic and allow for sufficient student reflection and input as well. While the content developers have a guide in terms of this pedagogy, it also becomes imperative to create a dialogue with teachers and students where they explore and expand on the ideas of visualization in the classroom. Sensitizing students and teachers to question and interpret visuals positively needs to become an integral part of the lesson plans. Each chapter could end with a set of questions on the visuals in the chapter.

The pedagogy of visualization would work as a style-guide for artists and as a reference-guide for content-writers. It can help both the writers and the artists through the complexities and gray areas that they come up with while dealing with gender sensitive issues.

Reflection

This presentation is more of a reflection piece based on my experiences as an artist, writer and educator. I really feel that it is essential to see the interdisciplinary nature of the work across artists, writers, teachers, students, publishers and content developers in order to ensure that gender sensitivity is addressed qualitatively and effectively. I would really appreciate if you could take a few minutes and choose a different role for yourselves than the one that you usually hold. For instance, be an artist, if you are a teacher etc. Now reflect on a day in your life and one event in which you had a tough moment because you are a man/woman. How would you rewrite it, teach, visualize or interpret it in the role you have assumed? Do you see a solution, an opportunity, a dead-end or a challenge?

Thank you for listening and being part of this exploration. I regret being unable to be part of this conference in person and hope that you find questions and ideas in this paper intriguing and valuable. Thanks again.

Srivi Kalyan

Srivi works at the fluid and exciting intersection of arts, media and education. She uses visual and performing arts as a platform to design innovative programs and interactive learning environments/media for both children and teachers. By creating open and powerful sanctuaries in her educational workshops, she explores leadership, creative and critical thinking, and community development/team building. Her work and workshops draw in the rich connections between language, art, performance, thought, and play.

She is an educator, writer, designer, illustrator. She has also trained in theatre and dance. She has written and illustrated several children's books as well as stories for adults. She has done her Masters in Arts in Education from Harvard and a Masters in Fine arts from Stella Maris College. She has worked with several publishers like Katha, Tulika, Pages for Ages and NCERT. She has also taught art and social studies at Amber Valley Residential school, and worked as the Creative Director with Sesame Workshop India. She has taught a semester long course on Illustration for undergraduate students at Stella Maris College, Chennai. Her works can be viewed on her website: www.sriviliveshere.com

She is the Founder-Director of Fooniferse Arts Pvt.Ltd (www.fooniferse.com) and Co-Founder and Partner at ArtIndea Project (www.artindiaproject.com), both organizations that are engaged in using arts and technology to create spaces for empathetic and honest education systems and human interaction.