

## Vernacular Creativity in the Digital Age: Teaching Advertising Communication in Connective Environments

La creatividad vernácula en la era digital: enseñanza de la comunicación publicitaria en entornos conectivos

Criatividade vernácula na era digital: O ensino da comunicação publicitária nos contextos conectivos

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### Abstract

This research comes about in response to the demand of *centennial* and *millennial* students for new methods to develop creativity through the use of new technologies. This paper considers the need to incorporate appropriationism as an educational strategy to promote creative competence in the digital age. The main goal of this work is to promote new didactic methods that allow



the integration of social and technological dynamics that determine online daily interactions. The *mash-up* has been adopted as the main tool to carry out a methodological proposal of teaching innovation in the academic context of Advertising Communication Studies. The construction of the model called *lateral visual thinking* constitutes a revision of *design thinking* based on two distinctive characteristics: vernacular creativity and the practice of lateral thinking through the recombination of materials of diverse origin and authorship in the World Wide Web.

**Keywords:** Appropriationism; found footage; Lateral thinking; Mash-up; User generated content; Vernacular creativity

## Resumen

Esta investigación surge en respuesta a la demanda por parte del alumnado *centennial* y *millennial* de nuevas fórmulas para el desarrollo de la creatividad a través del uso de las nuevas tecnologías. El artículo plantea la necesidad de incorporar el apropiacionismo como estrategia educativa para promover la competencia creativa en la era digital. El objetivo principal del trabajo consiste en fomentar nuevas fórmulas didácticas que consientan la integración de las dinámicas sociotecnológicas que marcan las interacciones del día a día en la red. Se ha adoptado el *mash-up* como herramienta principal para llevar a cabo una propuesta metodológica de innovación docente en los estudios de comunicación publicitaria dentro del contexto académico. La construcción del modelo denominado *lateral visual thinking* supone una revisión del pensamiento de diseño en base a dos características distintivas de los procesos comunicativos en la actualidad: la creatividad vernácula y la práctica del pensamiento lateral mediante la recombinação de materiales de diverso origen y autoría en la World Wide Web.

**Palabras clave:** Apropiación; contenidos generados por usuarios; creatividad vernácula; *foundfootage*; *mash-up*; pensamiento lateral

## Resumo

Esta pesquisa surge em resposta à procura dos alunos *centennials* e *millennials*, de disporem de novas fórmulas para o desenvolvimento da criatividade através do uso das novas tecnologias. O artigo levanta a necessidade de integrar o apropriacionismo como estratégia educacional para promover a concorrência criativa na era digital. O objetivo principal do trabalho consiste em promover novas fórmulas didáticas que permitam a integração das dinâmicas sócio tecnológicas que, por sua vez, marcam as interações do dia-a-dia na Internet. O *mash-up* foi adotado como a principal ferramenta para a realização de uma proposta metodológica de inovação para o ensino nos estudos de comunicação publicitária no âmbito acadêmico. A construção do modelo chamado *lateral visual thinking* envolve uma revisão do *design thinking* a partir de duas características distintas dos processos de comunicação de hoje: a criatividade vernacular e a prática do pensamento lateral, por meio da recombinação de materiais de diferentes origens e autorias na World Wide Web.

**Palavras-chave:** apropriação; *found footage*; lateral thinking; mash-up; user generated content; vernacular creativity

# 1. Introduction

The promotion and protection of creativity is one of the fundamental commitments undertaken by the United Nations and its member states to guarantee maximum freedom of expression in today's society (UNESCO, 2018). In its latest report on the way forward, the World Economic Forum supports this need by placing creativity third out of the top ten competencies for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, up from tenth on the same list in 2015 (Gray, 2020). Therefore, the university system urgently encourages the development of creative thinking to train professionals who are able to get ahead of the present and solve new challenges through multiple solutions. To train this kind of intelligence, education systems will need to adapt their approach so that students feel ownership of their own learning process, creating a strong sense of community through the use of new information and knowledge technologies (World Economic Forum, 2020).

According to recent research by Google, FAD and BBVA (Ballesteros et al., 2020), young Spaniards believe that technological mastery will be the key to their future work. Therefore, they demand a greater presence of technologies at the instrumental, strategic and emotional level throughout their educational process and a more solid training for the correct management of the information available on the network, thus overcoming the current model of self-training through the trial-and-error procedure. Achieving this goal requires a change of perspective based on more interactive teaching methods in which teachers take on the role of mediators and move away from the old hierarchical, unidirectional teaching model.

This study responds to this need, aiming to provide a new perspective resulting from the influence of collaborative processes that have emerged through the use of social networks during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, we will focus on the teaching of advertising, a sector where the presence of user-generated content has revolutionized the model of interaction between the different actors involved in the process of creating, producing and distributing creative products. In fact, since the influence of Web 2.0, brands have begun to establish a direct dialogue with users (branding), activating emotional links through the generation of valuable content (branded content), while users have become content generators assuming the old role of brands (digital identity as a personal brand).

In order to incorporate the usual dynamics of the connective environment into the educational sphere, our methodical proposal will focus on appropriationism as a conceptual frame of reference. The reuse and distribution of existing materials marks the day to day in online interactions and has become the basis of most media practice in the remix era. The absence of this type of process in an overly planned education system prevents questioning, interpretation and interaction between the agents involved in the educational act' (Agudelo, 2019, p. 11). As Agudelo points out, 'media practices are no longer strictly defined as receptions, but as appropriations, so they can also be understood as creative, constructive, and interpretive practices by the audience' (2019, p. 2).

Despite the apparent novelty of this strategy, it is a fruitful creative method with a long story in the arts sector. In this case, it will allow us to integrate the popular-media context (Martín-Barbero, 1987) for the development of critical, lateral and collaborative thinking from the classroom. Within the different appropriationist expressions, we will adopt the mash-up as a basic tool for the proposal of a teaching innovation methodology in which we will carry out an adaptation to the digital ecosystem of the contributions of De Bono (1989) on the conscious use of lateral thinking as a technique to free the mind from the analytical and reasoning processes which are characteristic of logical or vertical thinking.

## 2. Method

This article analyzes the usefulness of appropriationism as a pedagogical resource within the European Higher Education Area and, more specifically, in the field of advertising. The objectives are as follows

- 1) To respond to the demand of younger generations for a more innovative, participatory, and technological university education.
- 2) To incorporate methods of lateral thinking, design thinking and collective knowledge creation for the development of creative competence.
- 3) To integrate new audiovisual genres and formats into advertising education as an incentive to reflect on new creative possibilities in the digital age.

From the methodological point of view, we are dealing with a mixed descriptive-exploratory study. First, the main theories on the development of creativity have been reviewed, followed by a critical review to analyze their impact on the digital age. Starting from the study of the generational traits of millennials and centennials and having ascertained the place of creative development through the use of new technologies in the curriculum of the Degree in Advertising and Public Relations, a teaching method in response to possible current shortcomings has been proposed. For the proposal of this new methodology, theories of lateral thinking, the method of design thinking and the technique of found footage have been adopted as points of reference. The end result is the introduction of a new teaching methodology called lateral visual thinking and the design of an innovative activity.

## 3. Creative competition in the era of the *produser*

The scientific approach to creativity is complex, responding to the interrelationship of a wide variety of perspectives that encompass production, thought, personality and intelligence (Morales, Aguilar and Rodríguez, 2018). Today, creativity is measured in terms of having skills to face unforeseen situations, work as a team, propose solutions, get the most out of technology and apply competitive logic (Luengo, Luzón and Torres,

2008). Among the principles to be taken into account for the development of creative competence are 'motivation, fluency, initiative, risk-taking and the development of alternative responses' (Porto, 2008, p. 83).

A competent person is considered to be someone who is able to combine knowledge, skills and abilities appropriately with their cognitive, personal and social resources (Perrenoud, 2000). Thus, the old educational approaches that focused on memorization and repetition are obsolete, with cognitive and fundamentally creative skills beginning to be given prominence (Porto, 2008). This is a structural change that aims to motivate the learner rather than just evaluate them (Trillo, 2005). Therefore, it is not the teacher who teaches but the student who learns (Domínguez, 2011). The application of creative competence requires the reevaluation by the student of the concept of originality based on their own individuality, as well as the motivation by the teaching staff through attention to their demands and needs. In this way, the aim is to achieve greater fluidity in the pace of teaching, adapting to individual conditions and promoting, finally, a sense of responsibility and the development of the imagination.

Nowadays, the practice of remixing has benefited from the democratization and accessibility of content creation and is accessible to all users. We have been observing that millennials and centennials often resort to this technique intuitively with highly creative results. We believe that a correct guide for students using an appropriate method and tools would be an excellent support for understanding discourse in the age of the *produser* (Bruns, 2008).

### **3.1. Lateral thinking and abstract reasoning**

De Bono and Gombau (2008) developed the concept of 'lateral thinking' to refer to an alternative and multi-perspective approach to problem solving, from a position completely removed from logical and linear thinking. This is one of the creative methods that is indispensable because of its provocative approach and proven effectiveness. We insist that laterality refers to a type of creativity and perceptive reasoning that allows the analysis of a conflict from alternative perspectives based on originality, inventiveness, and flexibility, thus achieving greater freedom and fluidity of ideas (Villarroel, 2011). Unlike logical or vertical thinking, it is based on freedom, irrationality, flexibility, and ingenuity in the association of concepts, the elaboration of hypotheses and the deductive method (Prado, Viteri and Rojas, 2017).

Faced with new challenges and contexts of great change, it is necessary to develop abstract reasoning, based on planning, the choice of objectives and the mental representation of ideas. Likewise, the connection with emotional intelligence, in terms of personality, self-esteem and moods, it is essential to refine the ability to perceive, evaluate and express emotions (Bravo and Urquiza, 2020). Divergent thinking poses creativity from a

holistic perspective to arrive at approaches that the parties in a conflict analyze in a playful, chatty environment that is open to impulsive proposals, even at the risk of being described as an extravagant method. Brainstorming is a fundamental tool in the construction of the method of lateral thinking, a process of activating creativity already present in many of the most experimental creations of the historical avant-garde and in the communicative processes that govern the sociocultural relations of the new generations.

### **3.2. Vernacular creativity in the centennial and millennial generation**

Vernacular creativity refers to the creative action that intervenes in the daily management of content by users (Barton and Lee, 2012). Burgess (2006) uses the term 'vernacular' to refer to a native language that emerges in a social context versus the official language, responding to a subculture model. From an anthropological perspective, vernacular culture emerges as a result of knowledge acquired spontaneously from the most ancient civilizations, transmitted through the generations through family inheritance (Cuán, 2010). Generally, this concept refers to crafts and trades whose wisdom is gestated on approaches of observation, learning and imitation for later improvement or reinterpretation (Davila and Macchi, 2018). The vernacular culture develops in the informal, everyday, and local sphere more creative and innovative, outside commercial or institutional approaches (Guzmán-Simón, 2014).

Far from constituting an extinct or outdated legacy, in the digital age vernacular creations are firmly fixed in the medium with the greatest reach and permeability ever known to mankind: the World Wide Web. Digital popular culture is constructed individually by putting image before information, symbols before concepts (McLaughlin, 2007). Millennials, and especially the Generation Z, innately experiment with semiotically powerful digital resources, incorporating them into their digital discourses in a creative exercise in which appropriationism plays a decisive role (Martínez, 2018).

According to a recent study by Nielsen Global Media (2017), the defining features of young people today are: the technological dimension, hyper-connectivity, the integral incorporation of the smartphone into their daily tasks, multi-screening, the use of social networks, the viewing of content in streaming and the use of specialized apps. When it comes to the construction of new discourses, millennials and centennials are born creators of eminently visual content, resort to a habitual use of their own image, disseminate information of a personal nature, are aware of the environment and are concerned about hypersocialization. Appropriationism is an inherent part of their communication codes, both in terms of creativity and consumption in the process of collective construction of knowledge by means of inclusive socialization through new technologies (Sánchez Mateos, 2018). Irony as a rhetorical resource and interest in feminism and urban cultures are other generation keys (Castro, 2019) that allow us to understand the horizon of expectations and

the socio-communicative coordinates of our younger university students so that we can integrate them into our educational proposal.

## 4. Mash-up as a creative tool for teaching innovation

Among the basic pedagogical and communicative principles of education communication, Aparici (2014) highlights participation, dialogic communication and self-management. These questions serve as a model for our proposal to incorporate appropriationism in order to build an innovative, open-minded and transformative educational model. The inclusion of technology is a great opportunity for involving new generations in learning through the development of creative and lateral thinking. From this research, we back the introduction of the mash-up in the educational context as our strategy to integrate the appropriationist formula *par excellence* of referential culture in the digital age into a new educational horizon, aligned with sociocultural and technological advances.

Didactic exercises based on appropriationism aim to incorporate aesthetic sensitivity into the context of education by promoting creativity and play to establish an innovative setting where teaching and practice coexist (Read and Mantovani, 1999). They also provide personal growth mechanisms that allow students to incorporate into their expertise the knowledge, skills, and values of their socio-cultural context (Morales, Aguilar and Rodríguez, 2018). In addition, this type of practice invites us to reflect on the concept of *image* by promoting new readings through appropriate images and enriching artistic discourses (Esgueva and Nicolau, 2019). They also foster the critical attitude of creatives who, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reinterpreted art from the counterculture in order to offer an updated view of our present (García Alarcón, 2015).

Regarding the Degree in Advertising and Public Relations, among its fundamental objectives is 'training in the knowledge and use of communication technologies in the different multimedia and hypermedia environments and (...) the development of new media' (ANECA, 2005, p. 321). However, the importance of creative competence is not mentioned, despite the fact that the 'Creative and Designer' is included among the four core professional profiles. According to a survey of students, teachers and university administrators in this category carried out by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA in its Spanish initials), knowledge of creative thinking methods and their application in the advertising process occupies the last important position (ANECA, 2005, p. 276). When it comes to professional competencies, the capacity and ability to creatively shape the message is ranked second last compared to the first place occupied by technological mastery. However the final report includes the 'capacity to develop new creative approaches to assigned tasks' as a training requirement in line with Spanish and European experience and industry trends (ANECA, 2005, p. 328). This leads us to the need to design a method of teaching innovation that combines the development of creativity with

the management of new technologies for the training of professionals who are competitive and able to meet the requirements of their future clients (Roca, 2007).

#### **4.1. Method design: design thinking and found footage**

The method we propose comes about by integrating the lateral thinking principles of design thinking and the legacy of audiovisual practices based on found footage with the dynamics of vernacular creativity that new generations unconsciously apply in the personal management of their content on the web.

Let's remember that design thinking is a method for the development of creative competence conceived in the 1980s from Silicon Valley to identify challenges and propose innovative solutions. We support the appropriateness of incorporating this system as an educational tool for the development of the creative abilities of students throughout their formative process, so that they can face the complex challenges of the advertising world (Steinbeck, 2011). To put it into practice, personal involvement based on empathy, inclusive thinking, optimism, experimentalism, and collaboration is required (Brown, 2008). It is particularly relevant for the academic field as it encourages multidisciplinary teamwork within a context of disruptive logic, thus promoting a creative freedom that allows the implementation of a differentiating, original and surprising model of action.

On the other hand, found footage is an ideal technique for the implementation of appropriationism as it is characterized by the use of pre-existing audiovisual materials to generate new models of representation. It is a process that has been present since the very beginnings of cinema, which acquired greater prominence from the 1970s onwards and became consolidated in the 1980s as a metaphoric resource. It consists of the production of films made up mostly of fragments of footage, generated by somebody else, that appear arranged differently from the original version generating new meanings. In this procedure, we identify two fundamental moments of appropriationism: 'on the one hand, the moment when we extract an element from its initial context and give it an autonomous entity (and therefore a meaning) and, on the other hand, the moment when we decide to include it in a new context far from the original, resignifying it' (Serrano, 2013, p. 16).

Through our methodological proposal, we intend to formulate an update of found footage based on the democratization process that the use of the Internet allows, since nowadays the user becomes an active agent in the process of creating, producing, and distributing content (Fernández-Castrillo, 2014). We have adopted the mash-up as the main tool by consolidating the combination of information available on the web from an additive or cumulative logic based on interactive and recombinant processes (Sonvilla Weiss, 2010). As an audiovisual piece, 'the mash-up responds to a montage action that gives a new meaning to the pre-existing pieces' (Morales, 2009, p. 136). Advertising professionals are well aware that the originality of their proposal lies in the confluence of form and content,

so a story is not only what is told (history) but also how it is told (discourse) (McKee, 2009; García García, 2004).

## 4.2. *Lateral visual thinking*: a methodological proposal for advertising education

We introduce *lateral visual thinking* as a teaching innovation methodology for advertising studies. It is a disruptive method of audiovisual creation based on the appropriation of preexisting works in connective environments, subjected to a process of reinterpretation, editing and postproduction with the aim of developing a creative piece of innovative character. We recover the guidelines of the appropriationist discourse of Agudelo (2019) (reception, interpretation, appropriation) and the practice of abstract reasoning and divergent thinking for the development of the free association of ideas. In the following paragraphs, we will describe its implementation through an activity structured in three phases with their corresponding tasks.

1. **Observation.** As we have seen, millennials and centennials act in a hypersocialized way as digital communities (Álvaro, 2015). Therefore, we propose that the work be organized in multidisciplinary teams based on Belbin's role theory (2010).

a. *Deep file.* To ensure the involvement of all members and the maximum performance of the group through empathy, we will start with a participatory dynamic in which each student will summarize their life trajectory, references, and interests, including their professional expectations. Special attention will be paid to their digital footprint as gamers and their influence on social networks.

b. *Briefing.* We refer to the object of the exercise as a briefing using the professional term that refers to the client's order to the advertiser (Roca, 2007). The teacher will indicate the theme of the final piece, being able to choose a specific question or an open concept. In both cases, they will allow students complete freedom in the creative process, limiting themselves to stimulating classroom interaction (De la Torre and Violant, 2002).

c. *Brainstorming.* Brainstorming is one of the keys of lateral thinking for the stimulation of associationism: the members of the group will expound all the ideas, interpretations and associations suggested by the subject to be dealt with, with no filters (González Rivero, 2008). In this way, the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate concepts will emerge from a playful and relaxed atmosphere.

d. *Active covert observation.* Covert observation involves watching a group of people without them realizing it, allowing them to express themselves without intervening or trying to influence their opinions (Provenza and Michel, 2017). In this case, we refer to active observation since all subjects participate by presenting their ideas. Observers listen

empathetically, without discarding ideas, making value judgements, or questioning the feasibility of suggestions (Saiz, 2005).

2. **Interpreting.** This second phase consists of analyzing the ideas put forward in the initial phase in order to identify the symbols, codes and associations that will lead to the concrete formulation of the mash-up from the establishment of a line of work and precise objectives.

e. *Analysis of brainstorming.* This has two objectives: to identify conflicts and opportunities; and to discard ideas devoid of symbolism and meaning. It enhances the generation of ideas by association and the synthesis exercise to simplify the proposal put forward (Selva-Ruiz and Domínguez-Liñán, 2018).

f. *Viewing.* This is a documentation phase that involves locating the material available, directly or indirectly related to the selected ideas and the chosen narrative approach. We call this exercise 'viewing' using the term referring to the process of searching for archival material specific to documentary cinema, whose purpose is to give truthfulness to the content (Mamblona, 2012), This task can be done as a team or individually, assigning a share of topics to each member. The YouTube platform will be adopted as the main source of user-generated content thanks to its accessibility, its vast and constantly updated catalogue of audiovisual content and the effectiveness of its search engine (Ramírez-Ochoa, 2016).

g. *Selection.* The compilation of YouTube pieces that will be part of the final cut is decisive in determining the narrative point of view and the new intentionality of the material compared to its original version. There are no limits regarding the criteria of time and format selection: music videos, newsreels, documentaries, programmes, advertisements, photographs, painting, video games, etc. of any age (McGranahan, 2010). To facilitate the organization of the material, use will be made of the priorities matrix that allows the establishment of a hierarchical criterion of objectives, functions and constraints (González, Villarroel and Viveros, 2017). It should be noted that, since these are educational exercises, the purpose of which is learning and not dissemination, there are no legal restrictions on the use of images and music.

h. *Moodboard.* The group will represent the selected clips in a visual collage consisting of screenshots identifying each piece. This will allow them to have an overview of the selected videos and a mental image of the format style (Vallet, 2005).

3. **Appropriationism.** Following the natural course of appropriationist culture, this phase culminates the elaboration of the mash-up as an original creation.

i. *Narrative.* The aim of this point will be to fix the order in which the raw material is arranged (snippets of downloaded video clips) to construct a narrative or storytelling of the final product that leads to a 'symphonic unit' (Mckee, 2009, p. 49).

j. *Symbolic construction*. The clips are easily identifiable as they comprise iconic fragments of today's popular culture. They therefore become metaphors of the collective imagination in the digital age through the resignification of widely recognizable symbols. In this phase, students will carry out a double digital version of the 'hero's journey' (Campbell, 2015), as creators of the mash-up plot itself and facing the narrative challenge of generating a common thread from the appropriate and subsequently transformed material.

k. *Editing*. At this stage, each group faces the final construction of the mash-up through the assembly of the clips (of between 1.5 and 2 minutes' duration). For this we recommend the use of software similar to DaVinci, as it is free, intuitive and with professional tools for mounting and stacking accessible for all types of profiles. Due to the peculiarities of the genre, we suggest the technique of a montage over music that establishes the duration of the shot by rhythmic variations, similar to that of symphonic films (Sánchez López and García Gómez, 2009).

l. *Post-production*. The soundtrack will be the key component that sets the pace of the final piece. In addition, effects can be added that emphasize the desired intentionality through transitions, color, flash backs or flash forwards, glitch, overprints, titles, split screen, voice-over, silences, etc. The teacher should remind students that these resources should always be handled in favor of the dramatic intention and not as mere adornments.

m. *Validation*. Each group will show their mash-up to the rest of the teams to test their understanding of the message and the impact of the formal discourse before the final presentation. It is a learning process for both parties, based on constructive interaction from a starting point of communication, respect, and positive criticism (Castañeda, 2014). This task reproduces the so-called customer journey, i.e. the experience perceived by the end user.

n. *Final presentation*. Each group will present its mash-up following the technique of the elevator pitch, one of the booming trends in advertising and communication that consists of a short introduction (of between 45 seconds and 2 minutes) that recreates an elevator journey in which an attempt is made to persuade potential clients in an assertive and synthetic way (Ríos, 2018).

*Lateral visual thinking* is, ultimately, an educational method for the development of creative competence and divergent thinking in connected environments through digital appropriationism. In drawing up the proposal, consideration has been given to the natural status of the student-producers as content creators in an attempt to make the teaching of creativity and innovation in communication, especially advertising, more attractive.

## 5. Conclusions

At the present time, guided by processes of vernacular creativity, our youngest students exercise appropriationism outside the academic circuits every day, through the exchange of multiple resources, both their own and that of others, through social networks, putting into practice collective thinking and social action. It is therefore necessary to incorporate into education the processes that are essential to the dynamics of social interrelation, acquisition of knowledge and exchange of information in socio-digital networks. In today's digital ecosystem, we can observe hybridizations, resignifications and intertextualities that give a concrete idea of the evolution of the mechanisms of production, distribution, and consumption of content. The training of competent professionals in Advertising requires a structured methodology in terms of creativity that allows students to be involved in their habits of vernacular creativity and existing curricula. Therefore, it is necessary to establish points of connection between the digital skills of millennials and centennials as intuitive content creators and educational actions that allow teachers to emphasize the creative skills that are essential for their future performance in the advertising profession, as well as to promote active, participatory, and interactive involvement on the part of students.

The aim of this research was to point out the importance of the mash-up as an educational tool for creatively shaping the advertising message in the digital age, based on a new interpretation of reality that would give rise to a self-authored discourse, starting from the documentation and selection of pre-existing materials freely accessible from the World Wide Web. Through the construction of new discursive models in connected environments, the aim has been to encourage teamwork, a multi-tasking spirit and the development of some of the basic skills and abilities for the training of future advertisers, such as the ability to evolve into the unknown through insight and ingenuity to find effective solutions to problems that are yet to arise starting from creativity. An essential contribution, to face the threat of programming creativity that already occupies the main lines of R&D of companies such as Microsoft. We therefore believe that training aimed at the development of lateral and creative thinking will contribute greatly to the qualification of advertising professionals of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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