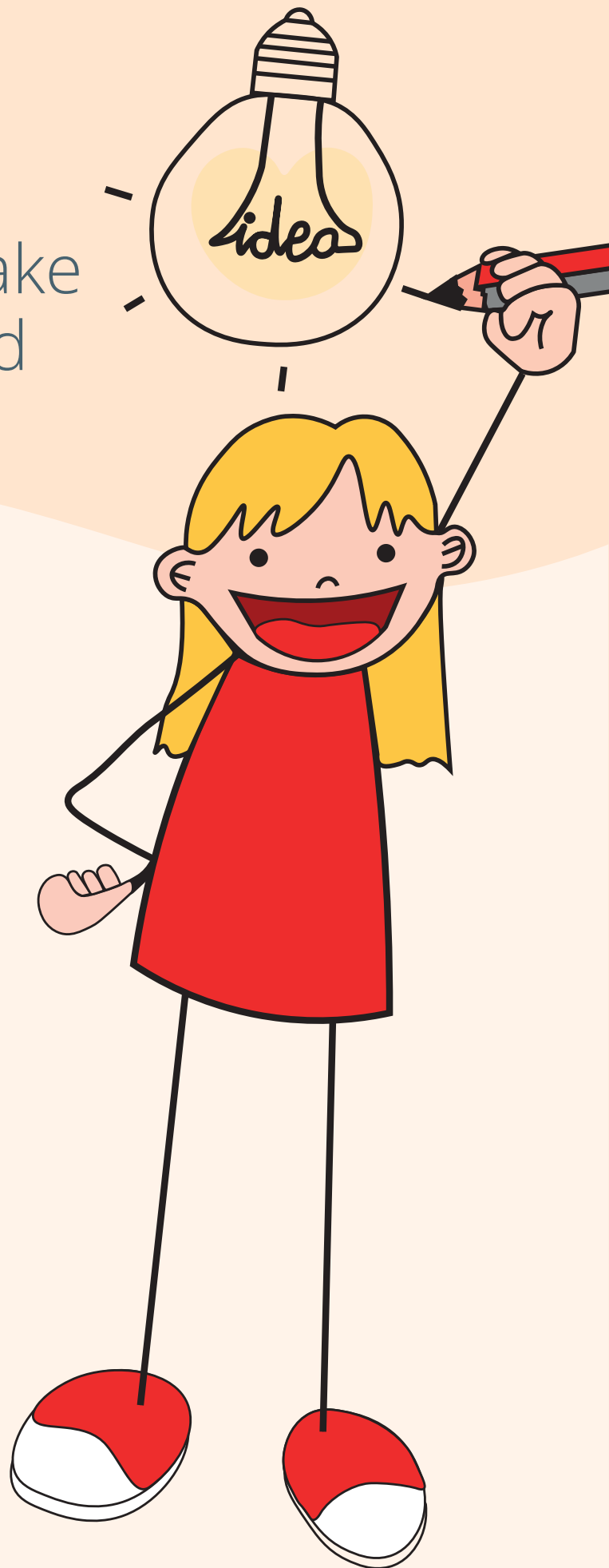


author

Visual Thinking, make
what's in your mind
visible



Garbiñe Larralde Urkijo is an expert in Visual Thinking as a learning tool and a referent for promoters of active, innovative educational methodologies. With a degree in Fine Arts, she has been a teacher and director in a variety of grades. She has a blog, 'EnReDar y aprender', and has recently published the book "Dibujar para aprender. Visual Thinking (VT) en Educación".

INTERVIEW WITH GARBIÑE LARRALDE URKIJO

by Jordi Viladrosa i Clua

We know that you are interested in the confluence of art and visual storytelling.

Tell us a little more about your experience in this area. Where does your interest in Visual Thinking in the classroom come from?

My interest arises from an accumulation of coincidences that came together at a certain time in my life which brought me closer to this way of organising thinking that I had experienced back in my childhood, but without naming it. I was learning with drawings without really knowing that this was something I could share with others.

In 2015, I attended a TED Talk

where I saw that in the back area of the room there was a person drawing what the speakers were saying. That caught my attention because the theme of the talk was serendipity and chance, and by chance, that reencounter with drawing came at a time when I had just been informed that for the following academic year I had been assigned a very theoretical subject that I had to teach to a group of students in the artistic baccalaureate, and I was looking for ideas.

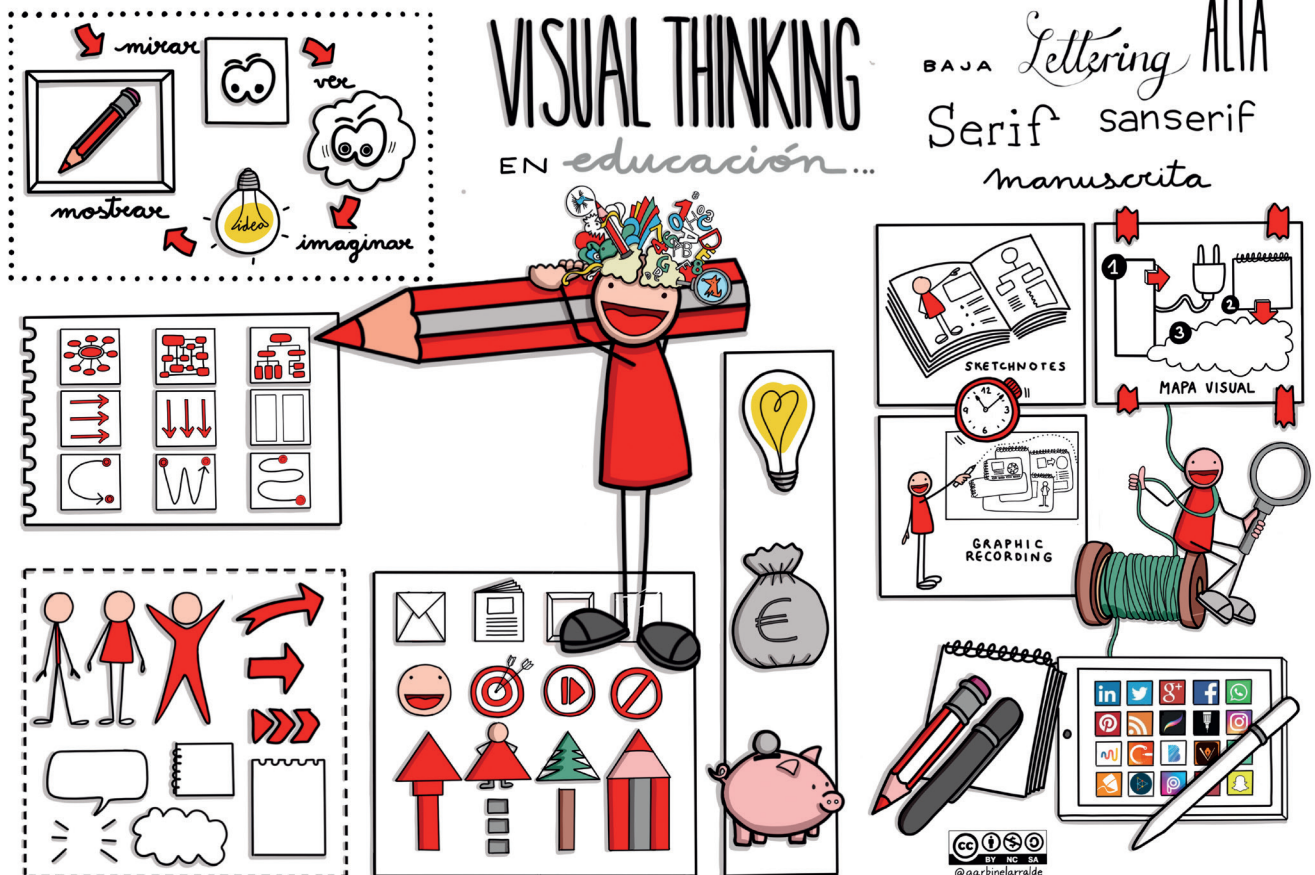
When I saw that person drawing during the talk, I thought it might be a different way of approaching learning, that the exercise of recording information through drawing was a

path worth exploring. That was the way Visual Thinking came back into my world, this time with a proper name.

For those who are not familiar with it: What is Visual Thinking?

Visual Thinking is a thinking tool, some people call it a methodology, which is very new. It was pretty much in this century when the business world revived a term proposed by the art theorist Rudolf Arnheim in the 1960s and 1970s.

Visual Thinking uses the tools of visual language to organise thought; that is, it sets out to make use of a series of resources that are typical of visual grammar but transferred to the world of thought with the aim of



Visual Thinking as an instrument to make visible what is cluttered in my head visible

using images to organise what is going through the head.

Thus, by means of simple drawings and brief texts, ideas, concepts or procedures are organised on a single piece of paper. Personally, I view Visual Thinking as a thinking tool, an instrument that allows me to make what is cluttered in my head visible and thus generate meaning and make it easier to recall information.

Let's talk about your book "Dibujar para aprender". On your blog 'EnREDar y aprender', we read that 'the annual meetings of Aulablog, the collaborations with Asociación Espiral, the project Mujeres Líderes en la educación del siglo XXI and all the workshops and congresses in which I have participated in recent years have been the stove on which I have been simmering the pages of this book'. Can you tell us a little bit about this journey?

The journey began, as I mentioned, in 2015 at a conference where I discovered that someone was drawing a paper at the same time it was being delivered. That same year, in June, I was fortunate enough to attend the International Conference on Thinking in Bilbao, the 2015 ICOT. That happened just at the time when I was beginning to think about the issue of visual thinking. At that congress, I was able to see and hear theorists of education and thought as prominent as Robert Swartz, Perkins and the Johnson brothers.

At that time, I was eager to find a way to motivate students who live in a universe that is often parallel to the school, where communication is mostly done through images. Today's

youth hardly use written messages in their communications, and when they do, they use short texts that they incorporate as a 'meme' on top of an image.

The challenge we face in education is to bring positions closer together and find common languages with which to reach our students and rebuild the bridge of intergenerational communication. New technologies can help us, and images are a very powerful resource in this. We adults have to make an effort to reach out. That is part of the task of education, and that's where much of my research lies: Visual storytelling, technologies, Visual Thinking.

You claim that drawing is a tool to represent ideas and that it allows better access to knowledge. How should our education system be improved so that visuals have a more prominent place in it?

This issue is quite complicated. At the time when the change in the law began to be discussed, I paid close attention to the debates that arose around the curriculum, and when I heard teachers from other fields claiming that their knowledge must also be included, I understood that the issue is difficult to solve. My conclusion was that although there is a consensus that the curriculum cannot take any more content and is already overloaded, reaching agreements will be impossible if everyone continues to think in their 'realm', that is, the realm of images, the realm of thought, the realm of mathematics, each in their own area of interest.

In spite of this, all of us who work in education have a common concern and conviction that what we are doing right now is working poorly. Dividing the work into subjects and working in such an isolated fashion is not working, and this is not just an impression because the data confirm it. So, something has to be done, and in that something, interdisciplinary work or tools such as Visual Thinking,

The challenge in education is to bring positions closer together and find common languages

which joint the visual with the textual, can be a way forward.

Faced with so many emerging methodologies, what would you say to a teacher who thinks he or she doesn't know how to draw to convince him or her that Visual Thinking can be applied to any subject?

In my workshops, I usually ask how many of the participants believe that they do or do not know how to write. Normally, almost everyone raises their hand. My next question is to how many have published books or how many have written a novel or a book of poetry. Very few people raise their hands in response to this question.

The same thing happens with drawing; creating an artwork by means of drawing is not the same as using drawing as a tool for thought. Two strokes, four circles and three lines can help to create a character or represent a factory, a lamp, a book or whatever you need to communicate; you don't need to know how to draw like an artist to do this.

This is the answer: it is not essential to draw like an artist to do Visual Thinking. Drawing is learned by drawing, just like anything else, so it's just a matter of getting over the initial hump and starting to experiment.

Making sure that what you are drawing means what you want to say is not easy. How can you draw a metaphor? You devote a chapter of your book to talk about the benefits of Visual Thinking. We would like you to 'draw' for us, this time in words, what these benefits are and why it is important for learning.



Drawing is learned by drawing, so it's a matter of getting over the hump and starting to experiment

Visual Thinking is not only drawing, but a representation in which text and image go hand in hand. Thus, the text anchors the meaning of the image and the image enriches the meaning of the text. In other words, a dialogue is forged between the two languages, and we cannot do without either of them. Visual Thinking allows us to organise ideas in the space of a sheet of paper through a series of elements that help us to prioritise ideas, generate reading paths and highlight certain parts.

Getting back to your question, metaphors are figures of speech that are actually polysemous, even though we think of them as universal. So take an image like a light bulb: What is it talking about? An idea, creativity or an electric power company? The image has different meanings, but if

you add a key word or even another drawing to this light bulb, what you will achieve is to set and anchor its meaning in that specific context.

Another benefit has to do with what I view as Visual Thinking as a learning tool. Drawing should not be a tool for teaching but an instrument to be used for learning. It is not so much a matter of the teacher attractively drawing an idea or creating a visual map that represents certain concepts for the students to copy. The idea is to give the students activities in which they have to generate their own visual notes. That is where the learning is, because a person who draws has to stop to understand what they are representing; they have to stop and think about what they are doing.

It is true that in Visual Thinking there are some formats that are very striking, but in education the most interesting thing about this tool is that it allows you to study calmly, to think, order, extract ideas, think about how to draw them, that is, ask yourself: What is this? How do I draw this idea? How do I represent this concept? In this game, in this dialogue between image, thought and concepts is where

I believe meaningful learning can be found.

Students are often asked to make outlines and concept maps. How can we make visual maps gain ground in the representation of knowledge? What role does digital technology play in this regard?

I like to remember Daniel Penac's statement: 'reading does not admit imperatives', and to tinker with this quote to say that 'learning does not admit imperatives'. In Visual Thinking you may be given the idea, all the concept maps you want, but if that concept map with that fixed structure does not fit with your cognitive scaffolding, with what you previously know, you won't really be able to retain, understand and assimilate that knowledge. So, why don't we

VT allows to organise ideas on paper through a series of elements that help us to prioritise ideas

give each student the freedom to construct knowledge in his or her own way? What would we have to do to make that possible? Teachers themselves should first be trained and discover that drawing is a valid tool for learning, and then allow and even facilitate students' use of it.

As far as technologies are concerned, I think the important thing is to make the working tools invisible. Visual Thinking is not done with technology; it is done with the head, with thought. So it makes no difference what you use to draw the information you are organising. You can draw the visual maps on a tablet with a digital pen as long as the tool is not distracting and the

Drawing should not be a tool for teaching, but a learning instrument for students

focus is on the thought, but you can also draw them on a pad of paper with a pencil and colour them with markers. It is exactly the same. In other words, Visual Thinking is not technology, although it can be done with technological tools.

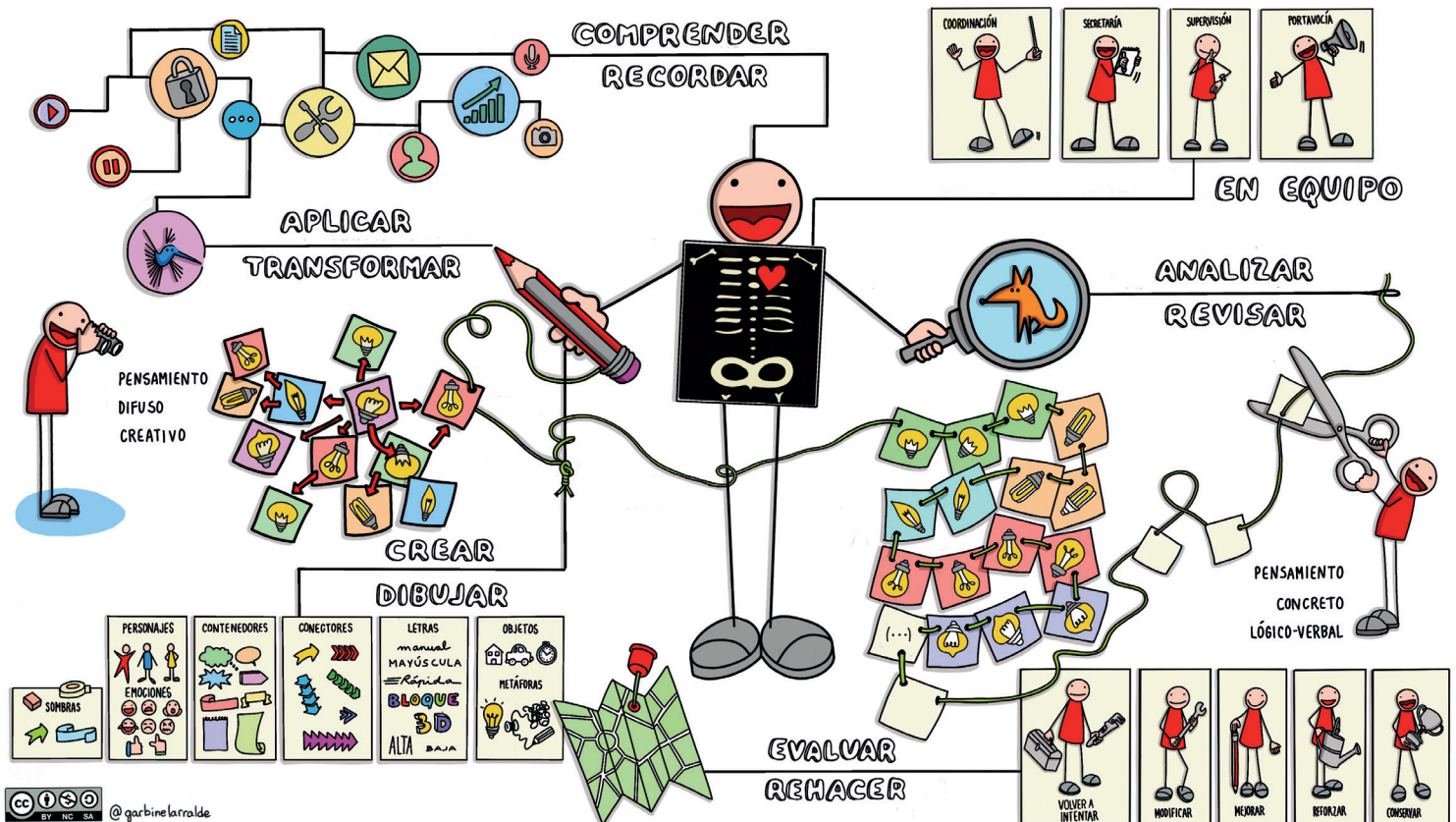
You state that 'by incorporating Visual Thinking into the teaching toolkit, teachers are better able to offer new learning opportunities and provide more personalised attention'. Tell us a little more about Visual Thinking as a learning tool. How can technology and Visual Thinking help to better personalise learning?

Technology allows us to personalise learning because it enables us to serve students in a different way. When I did research on artists' books at university, I discovered that writing arises from the human need to apprehend words and stories that disappear when the sender is no longer with us when transmitted

orally. Thus, books arose from the need to give language a physical support. That support today is digital, which allows us to grab words, grab images, hold them, save them, store them, encapsulate them; technology is wonderful in that sense.

But although technology allows us to store information in many different ways, the important thing in education is to mentor each student in his or her learning process and give him or her the option of organising the content in the way that best fits his or her way of understanding reality.

Here's an illustrative anecdote: in one of the workshops I teach, I had a very interesting debate with a group of teachers who were determined that the water cycle could not be represented in any other way than in the form of a circle. I argued to them that depending on the level of knowledge, the cycle can be drawn as a square in which the starting and ending points touch. That is



what makes it a cycle and not the number of 'stops' along the way. The important thing is to allow the children to understand the concept of returning to the point of origin and starting over. The obligation to understand the cycle as a circle may cause some people to fail to grasp the concept. And why not let everyone see it in their own way? Maybe first the student sees it as a square, but maybe later it becomes a pentagon, a hexagon, an octagon, and in the end that person ends up saying, 'Well, look, it was a circle'.

Because that is learning, after all, while the other thing is teaching. That is, I teach you how you have to

Give students the option of organise the content according to their understanding of reality

understand this, but if you really want your students to learn, give them permission and mentor them as they build whatever comes to mind.

Finally, we know about your motivation and involvement in the pursuit of educational change and your commitment to women's leadership. Tell us about the projects you are working on right now and which of them you think will have a more prominent role in the future.

I'm still drawing, still thinking and lately I'm testing the potential connection between visual thinking and computational thinking.

In the history of human beings, there has been a slow process of abstraction, starting with images that conveyed the first information, which were gradually transformed into letters, which then became words, terms and concepts. This long and very deep process has been created like fine cuisine, little by little, over

If you want your students to learn, mentor them as they build whatever comes to mind

a low flame. A similar process of abstraction takes place at school, but we often force the timing of it and go from image to text too quickly and without keeping those aspects of the image that can be very valuable for learning.

Thus, I believe that in this process, visual thinking can help us to take the leap to computational thinking in a more natural way. And this is what I would like to analyse and discover: whether the visual language can contribute something to enrich and help in children's learning process, which is ultimately what we are interested in.

