Real-Time Teaching

Visual Literacy as a Classroom Approach

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I(Cheryl, second author) recently observed 2 ninth-grade general English classrooms in an urban high school in which I do research. Both were print rich—walls covered with posters, charts, and artwork that referenced literature texts, content knowledge, and curriculum standards. In both classrooms, similar content was covered, including literature texts such as *Monster*, *Who Am I Without Him?* and *Day of Tears*.

Yet, upon closer inspection, the practices in each of the spaces were different; and these practices made a difference in the levels of engagement and student performance. Though each space was print rich, the visually rich environment in one classroom was a product of the students' literacies, including student-created CDs of musical narratives of *Monster* and *Who Am I Without Him?*; photos and drawings/paintings and artistic renderings of literature characters, themes, and settings; poetry and lyrics from songs of protest; and Facebook pages from characters of the novels. In the room, students moved fluidly across literacy stations and book clubs, worked individually to create artifacts, and had gallery walks of their peers' published works that prompted their own reflection, commentary, discussion, and writing.

Observing and participating in this particular classroom, I realized that I could *see* these students' worlds, their thinking, and knowledge: The texts that the students produced and interacted with demonstrated a discerning use of color, shape, spatial representation, print, message and meaning/communication, and critical knowledge of canonical and popular culture.

The teacher used her students' visual literacies to help drive instruction and ground knowledge. The "visual literacy" in this ninth-grade class was not restricted to traditional graphic organizers and webs. Using this as a model, how can educators purposefully tap into our students' visual literacies in the secondary school classroom?

What Is Visual Literacy and Why Use It in the Classroom?

Visual literacy refers to the ability to make meaning from information in the form of the image. The "reader" of this image has the competence or ability to interpret, evaluate, and represent the meaning in visual form.

We live in a visual culture. Students' everyday lives reflect the dominance of images on screen that are colorful, that have animation, texture, and dimensionality. The combined influences of the image have shifted the way students make

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meaning. Former learners certainly made meaning from images, and there was much more emphasis in school and out-of-school on the written word, whereas today meaning making is more complex with more mediums, materials, and modalities.

The visual can be systematically and purposefully harnessed as a

- Vehicle for learning
- Reflection on identity
- Means of organizing instruction
- Way to connect in and out of school literacies
- Way to develop critical readers of texts

Visual literacy in the classroom offers opportunities to create, analyze, and critique texts and to discern how meaning is inscribed through the visual.

Applying a Critical Lens Through Use of the Visual

Introducing literature texts using visual elements offers opportunities for teachers to initiate the use of a critical lens to understand and interpret themes, structure, and content of texts. For example, the teacher in the English classroom can consider showing images with PowerPoint or Prezi to introduce a novel. The class session takes the following approach.

Creating a Visual Context

To harness your teaching to the visual, apply the following steps to a multimodal text:

1. Jot down a word or phrase that comes to mind for each of the images.
2. Write one connecting emotion or mood that the image conveys or that you feel.
3. Describe what the photo, movie clip, et cetera represents.
4. Think of a sound or melody that might accompany the visual.
5. Ask probing questions: What is the intended message? How is meaning conveyed in the image (e.g., gender, ethnicity/race, setting, social class, national identity)? Who do you think is the author? Why did the author

choose this particular genre, mode, medium, color, spatiality?
6. Tell the story that one image evokes for you.
   - Students write
   - Pairs share (read or discuss what they wrote)
   - Class discussion: How did your own identity influence your choices (e.g., experiences/background, skill, knowledge)? How might you represent your story visually (e.g., color, print, sound, movement, perspectives, message, settings, event)?

Applying the Visual In Text

In this follow-up session, the focus again is on a specific literature text intended to develop analysis by identifying the message and intent in using visual design elements. Visual images are created from literature using words, character, setting, and action. Using preselected lines from the literature text/novel, each group of students is assigned the task of creating a visual representation and rationale for visual.

1. Groups of 4 randomly select from a list of lines from the text (phrase, sentence, quote).
2. Each group discusses the ideas for representing through a visual image.
3. Each group is given a visual perspective/genre or form of visual representation of conveying the meaning of the line:
   - Photo (using a digital camera)
   - Visual collage (using the computer/Google images)
   - Poster (using chart paper, markers)
   - Magazine cover (using old magazines, photos, glue, markers)
   - Object (using craft supplies)
   - Advertisement (using video)
4. Group presentations: Each group identifies the line prompt, and presents the image the group created based on the line. Students are responsible for identifying the focal message, the perspectives they intended to convey, the strategic choices they made, and how the

visual modes afforded and constrained their intended meanings and messages. How do the structure, mode, and medium of the genre inform how they were able to communicate meaning?

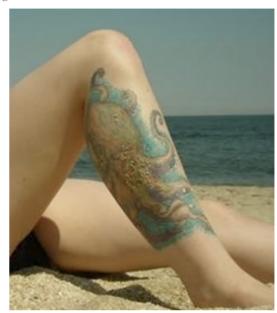## Applying the Visual in Other Classroom Contexts

Images are suspended in webs of meanings, and one reason that they are valuable is that it is possible to trace threads of meaning from elements in the images that can be used in the curriculum. For example, a picture of an item of food can start a discussion about chains of food production and distribution, the effects of eating certain kinds of food on human health, and the pleasures and etiquettes of eating. These threads can be "mind-mapped" around the image.

Visual images of various kinds are already used within other curriculum areas. For example, diagrams and visualizations can be found everywhere in the science classroom. Just as Cheryl's vignette illustrates the power of the visual environment created by teachers and students, science, social studies, and math classrooms all demonstrate the communicative power of visuals to explain concepts and make links between different kinds of knowledge. In the history classroom, using artifacts and visual images can often help students relate to distant events.

Take the example of Gemma's (pseudonym) tattoo (see Figure 1). Today, tattoos are a common expression of self across age groups. It has not always been so. This could be used in the history classroom to talk about the history of body adornment and encounters between different cultures. In the science classroom the image provokes questions about the process of tattooing, marking the skin, and even the ramifications of tattoos in relation to health.

Finally, the image can be used to discuss the aesthetics of the image and the ways in which identities can be expressed through tattoos, and how the choice of tattoo expresses identities and memories foregrounded by the wearer. The image could then prompt connections with such literature as Stieg Larsson's *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*.

Figure 1   Gemma's Tattoo

Students would immediately relate to the significance of tattoos for different social groups. For people who do not use written language fluently, the fact that images can be used in symbolic ways in the classroom would be an empowering idea. Teachers can ask learners to design their own tattoos and to talk about them. In an adult learning classroom, the image could be used as a training device for students entering health and beauty therapy careers.

Becoming Critical Consumers and Producers of Visual Texts

Visual literacy ties together critical analysis of texts. Applying a critical lens to texts in the classroom can encourage students to do the same outside of the classroom. Developing visual literacy invites students to reflect on and critique the production of a range of visual texts in their everyday lives such as websites, advertisements (e.g., television, billboard, music, videos), political advertisements, public service announcements (e.g., Let's Move campaign, Animal Rights, Gender), film promos, paperback novel covers, and television shows.

Dependent on the curriculum context, different kinds of questions can be asked of images. We have

offered some questions for the English classroom in the examples presented earlier in this article, but different questions can be applied to different disciplines.

Visuals have a starting point in people's everyday experience. The task and range of choice allows students to become more self-directed and motivated in their reading of visual texts, and their critique and commentary of how they interact with their real-world and popular culture texts. A visual literacy approach in the classroom connects with students' everyday lives as consumers and producers of texts. It helps them to analyze and explore the webs of meaning within which the images exist.

To conclude, we offer a student production to illustrate our argument. In Figure 2, you see an image from a digital story by Patsy, a ninth-grade student in an English support class in New Jersey. Patsy was studying Homer's *The Odyssey*, and to connect the journey motif to her own life, she focused on a rick-rack dress that her Mum made for her when she was little.

The rick-rack dress is at the center of a web of meaning for Patsy, and she traces threads through this meaning to structure her digital story about her journey into the fashion industry. Although this was initiated in the English classroom, it could work in other subject areas, especially social studies.

Visual images present concrete details that make them immediately accessible in a different way from verbal texts. At a glance, the viewer can be drawn into a dialogue with the image, use it as a prompt for exploring personal meanings, and go on to connect these with wider issues. For historical and technical reasons, visuals have not been as common a resource in the classroom as written texts, but we now have the means to explore their potential much more fully.

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Figure 2   Patsy's Rick-Rack Dress