

Developing Visual Literacy through the Arts in Education

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In a world in which images now seem to come to the forefront over words, it is important for educators of all disciplines to find ways to foster students' visual learning. This type of learning involves visual literacy, defined at its basis as “the ability to understand and create visual messages” (Gangwer, 2009, p. 2). Images come in a wide variety of forms, necessitating a broad approach to visual literacy instruction. One such approach is through arts education. Art, whether visual or performing, can both utilize and inspire imagery, making it a prime area to incorporate visual literacy instruction. Johnson (2008) purports that art educators should guide their students' “verbal and visual literacy in the aesthetic domain,” because otherwise, “their art may be misinterpreted or neglected and the young artists' meanings never communicated” (p. 79). To effectively guide visual literacy development, educators need to understand its basic elements and explore activities that they can incorporate into instruction.

Visual Learning Theory Elements

According to Gangwer (2009), there are four key elements that make up visual literacy, allowing educators to “address the effective use of visual skills in the pursuit of learning” (p. 3): full-spectrum visual learning, active and performance-based learning, dynamic translation, and a multidisciplinary approach. Each of these elements can be related to arts education (e.g., visual art, drama, dance, and music).

Full-Spectrum Visual Literacy

Gangwer (2009) describes full-spectrum visual literacy as “the ability to understand non-linguistic communication made with visual imagery and the ability to use visual imagery to communicate” (p. 3). For students to understand and use images as a form of communication requires them to be able to visually encode and decode through the processes of expression and

translation (Gangwer, 2009). An art form that can specifically help develop students' full-spectrum visual literacy in the classroom is, not surprisingly, that of visual art (e.g., drawing, painting, sculpting, photography, etc.).

Visual art. Classroom activities utilizing visual art can help develop students' full-spectrum visual literacy skills of encoding and decoding images. Johnson (2008) put together a list of tips for educators to assist them in incorporating visual literacy instruction with art. For example, to help students visually express their ideas and thoughts (encoding), Johnson suggests using visual art as a substitute for writing when giving a prompt (e.g., "What is the weather like today?"), while having students consider their feelings and perceptions about the prompt subject.

Feelings and perceptions should also be expressed when learning how to interpret visual imagery and its meanings (decoding). Having students verbally discuss each other's artwork in a controlled manner (e.g., in an "Artists' Circle") can help them "discover the effects of their artwork on the viewers; how particular colors, forms, and media express meanings; and how the artwork can evoke recollections and memories" (Johnson, 2008, p. 78).

Active and Performance-Based Learning

Besides full-spectrum literacy, another key element of visual learning is active and performance-based learning. Gangwer (2009) explains this as "an active approach to engaging the world" which challenges students to "apply knowledge to new and authentic situations" (p. 3). Drama is a performance art that often is an active representation of real life situations, making it an ideal conduit for active and performance-based visual learning.

Drama. Perry, Wessels, & Wager (2013) demonstrate one specific classroom approach for building visual literacy through drama by giving groups of students a photograph, asking them to "think visually while deconstructing the elements of the photograph to interpret

meaning” (p.652), and then having the groups use those interpretations to develop and present their own improvised scenes.

This approach especially relates to Gangwer’s (2009) idea behind active and performance-based learning of using images to connect with the real world. Perry et al. (2013) explain that when “the photograph becomes part of the lived experience of the student in the moment of viewing,” and when the “students become aware of their way of seeing, an opportunity is generated for a discussion of the ways that viewing and identity are intertwined” (p. 650). In this approach, drama becomes a newly created active image inspired by a still image.

Dynamic Translation

Similar to active and performance-based learning, the visual learning element of dynamic translation uses images to make new connections. Gangwer (2009) defines dynamic translation as “the process of expressing ideas in new forms” (p. 3), which deepens understanding. Dance, a performance art like drama, allows for expression of ideas, feelings, and messages through the visual form of movement.

Dance. The interpretive aspect of dance makes it a beneficial tool to teach students how to translate meanings from one form to another, creating connections and deepening learning. Almost anything can be translated into the form of interpretive movement by exploring its elements and thinking creatively. For example, depending on the subject area, students could create dances and/or improvise to express the feeling of a piece of music, the plot of a story, the cycles of life, the process of a conversation, or the emotion felt when looking at a photograph.

Looking at it from a slightly different perspective, students could view a dance performance and then translate the meaning they interpret into new forms, such as written story, poem, or piece of art. Whether students dance or watch others dance, the performance aspect of

presenting bodies in space provides opportunity for visual communication and learning through “spatial and kinesthetic image-making” (Perry et al., 2013, p. 657).

Multidisciplinary Approach

The last key element in the visual learning theory is the multidisciplinary approach, which Gangwer (2009) explains “reflects an awareness of the dynamics of various styles and modalities of learning and experience” (p. 4), and encourages writing, connecting, clustering, creative expression, imaging, and visual thinking. An educational area that easily lends itself to the multidisciplinary approach is that of music, in that students can learn how to read and write music, connect music with movement or images, and express feelings or visions through music. Music can reflect auditory (e.g., listening to music), kinesthetic (e.g., playing an instrument), and visual (e.g., reading music) modalities of learning.

Music. Cosenza (2006) suggests certain classroom music activities that can help develop visual literacy through a multidisciplinary approach. For example, when learning about and listening to various types of music, students could close their eyes and visualize colors, images, and/or movement that they associate with that music, and then describe their visualizations verbally, in a written manner, or by creating a piece of artwork or dance.

Similarly, another activity Cosenza suggests involves students first looking at a piece of artwork, and then describing that image in terms of mood, symmetry, shapes, etc. and using those descriptors to create movement. Then, music could be chosen to accompany that movement. When educators require students “to demonstrate multiple ways of knowing,” they open up for their students “new vistas of possibilities for interpreting the world that is around them and inside their own imaginations” (Cosenza, 2006, para. 23).

Conclusion

Visual literacy can be taught in the classroom using a variety of approaches and activities. Johnson (2008) explains the importance of educators incorporating visual literacy in their instruction: “A picture may be worth a thousand words, but these words can remain unsaid or misunderstood when [educators] do not attend to their development.” (p. 79). According to Gangwer (2009), “[t]he visual teaching template is appropriate for all subjects and grade levels” (p. 7); and the subjects of visual and performing art offer an ideal base for classroom activities that foster visual learning in each of its four elements: full-spectrum visual learning (e.g., visual art), active and performance-based learning (e.g., drama), dynamic translation (e.g., dance), and a multidisciplinary approach (e.g., music).

References

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