

In the Classroom 5

Why Is Visual Literacy So Important?

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Stan Skrabut: Thanks for taking time to join me and listening to my podcasts. I can't tell you how much it means to me. I really appreciate it and hopefully you're getting some great value out of this podcast. This week we are going to explore the topic of visual literacy as it fits into this whole realm of multimedia development and multimedia literacy. Specifically, we're going to try to define it. Identify reasons why we should be giving it more emphasis in our classrooms. Also, I'm going to share some exercises that I think you can use in your classroom. Let's get going. When I look at visual literacy, one of the first things I think about are PowerPoint presentations.

In the last episode, I talked about death by PowerPoint and how we can prevent that a little bit. Well, I try to go to a conference every year and typically I go either to Social Media Marketing World or the Association for Talent Development Conference. In both cases, these folks know how to wield their visual support for presentations. I don't typically walk out of a presentation, but for the Association for Talent Development, on three separate occasions, I've walked out of a presentation. One of them happened to be a keynote presentation, and I really try not to walk out of those. All of those presentations were given by individuals who are in higher education.

The reason I walked out of them is their presentations paled in comparison to what these other presenters were doing, and especially in terms of supporting what they were doing in terms of using visuals properly. They were very much on the side of death by PowerPoint, where these other corporate trainers and government trainers were very much using imagery to its fullest. I think we could do better in our classroom if we start wielding visual aspects of our lectures more appropriately, that we need to have a better balance. According to the visual literacy today, the definition of visual literacy is the ability to read, write and create visual images.

It is a concept that relates to art and design, but also has much wider applications. Being able to read, write and create visual imagery. That reading part is actually very critical. Being able to see an image and understand the meaning that is being shared by that image. Educause, they define visual literacy is the ability to recognize and critically appreciate meaning in visual content and to use visual elements to create effective communication. In higher ed, as I've seen it, we do not spend enough time on the visual aspects and yet they're critically important. First of all, our brain spends a lot of time and a lot of energy and a lot of our brain is dedicated to visual processing.

We should also spend our time trying to create visuals, so we can use that processing power. This is becoming more and more important, especially in our society today. According to a 2015 article, *Why Visual Literacy Is More Important Than Ever and Five Ways to Cultivate It* by Saga Briggs, we are sharing more than 1.8 billion photos daily.

This is probably gone up. I know, I spend a lot of time exploring social media as it deals with marketing, and the conferences that I go to and the discussions that I'm having and the articles I'm reading, really focus in on the use of imagery. Imagery and videos and it's really very prominent in our life.

Individuals are going out there and telling stories using imagery. They are very much capitalizing on that a picture is worth 1,000 words. They are getting to the point where they're using this imagery as a substitute for even text, that they're using the pictures to tell their story. Because our world is so visual, we must also teach our students how they can be affected by this media. That we have advertisers out there, we have news that is out there, and they are using imagery to guide and shape the message. They have an agenda and they're using this imagery to affect their agenda, and we have to be able to understand it.

I mean, there's very simple tricks and techniques that a photographer can use to get a certain effect. We have to understand that, and we have to have our students be able to understand that. Plus, using imagery has, the research has come out saying that if you properly use imagery to support your lectures or your classroom, that you can enhance the absorption of information, that you can help them remember these concepts that you want them to remember because the visual imagery supports the narration part. There has to be a balance that images are going out and being processed in one part of the brain and being stored in that part of brain and narration is in another place.

When you can use two different parts of the brain you stand a greater chance of them understanding and grasping what you're doing. As I alluded to in the previous episode, that you don't see a lot of documentaries with a lot of text on it. They're properly using narration and properly using visuals to get their message across. Why is that? How can we do that better? My charge to you is go out there and try to enhance your presentations. First place, as I mentioned once again previous episode, is start getting rid of the text that you have on your slides and start using proper visuals to support that particular message.

As I was reading and brushing up on what I wanted to talk about, one of the things that the different writers explained or highlighted was that a lot of educators don't know where to start, because they've never had classes that taught really how to use imagery. We have to go ahead and break the cycle and start doing it ourselves and brushing up on these techniques on what is a good image, how could that image support the message and start understanding those things and being able to use it for our students. The Toledo Museum of Art has developed this model, it's called the Art of Seeing Art.

Really, they're focused on looking at pieces of art and being able to analyze them and extract meaning from those different pieces of art. They noted that this could be used also to just look at regular images. It's a six-step process. The different steps are look, observe, see, describe, analyze, and interpret. When you're looking at and it could be a magazine cover, it could be a photograph, it could be a video, it could be art, anything that's visual, the first place to start is really to slow down and look. Looking is just

allowing your visual sensory to pull in that information and just acknowledge that you are looking, that you're taking this into your view.

Observation is a more active process. This takes a little bit of time. This is where you are taking whatever that's in your view, what you're looking at, and basically putting it into a mental catalog with all those other visual elements that you have. We talked about reading and literacy. When you look at a word, actually what you're doing is, you are capturing a picture of that word, and that word it's visual, and it's processed in a part of your brain if you've learned to read visually. If you've learned to read by hearing, then it gets actually processed in a different part of your brain. To actually see the word is you have a picture of that word and it gets processed. Building up that catalog.

Then you have seeing. Seeing involves recognizing and connecting the information that you're taking in with your eyes and attaching it to previous knowledge and experiences, so that you can extract meaning. You're pulling it in, you're cataloging it, now you're trying to assign meaning to it. Describing allows you to identify and organize your thoughts about what you've seen. To do that, to describe it, you may want to take an inventory. This is where some of these other elements I'm going to talk about here in a second come into play to help you better to describe it. Then we get into analysis, which uses the details that you identified in your descriptions and helps you make reason and meaning out of it.

Then finally, interpretation is you draw some type of a conclusion to it. You bring this information into your eyes, you categorize it, you attach previous information and knowledge to it. You start taking inventory of what's in the image, analyze it, make it a description that's going to be useful for you. Then, finally, what's the overall meaning of that picture. This model from the Toledo Museum of Art is a good way to start looking at images but there's also some other pieces to this that we have to keep in mind.

There's also all kinds of elements and principles that come into photo composition, to art composition, that must be taken into account. This is certainly not the podcast to go into great depth about that. There's other experts that can really tear that apart and reassemble it to make meaning of that. Simply by changing some of the elements of art, by changing the color of an image, you can get a different effect. Therefore, you end up with a different meaning, even with the same photograph, that a black and white photograph has a different meaning than a colored photograph.

The use of lines to be able to control where you are looking. Once again, that helps to assign meaning. The different shapes that are in the imagery. Why did they choose those particular shapes? The use of space, using negative space, for example, can affect the meaning and different textures, but then you also have principles of design. Is the photo balanced, that you're providing equal weight? Is there something of emphasis that draws your eye? Was that intentional?

What was the purpose from the individual who took the photograph? Why that point of emphasis? Is there movement? Can you identify movement? Is everything proportioned? What's the perspective that they're looking at this particular photo? Some of the research that I was looking at, they were showing different photos,

different historical photos. When you look at it, sometimes the photos were taken, there was multiple shots from different perspectives.

When you put the different perspectives against each other, you actually got a different meaning. It was very fascinating when a news organization or a magazine chooses a photo. They may be choosing from thousands of photos. Why did they choose that particular photo, and that has a lot of meaning? With all these different elements, you create meaning. You create these ideas, you shape these ideas, and we just have to be aware of that.

Ways to start developing this idea of visual literacy. First is just awareness, that this comes into play. Just slowing down and taking time. When you get a magazine, looking at the cover. Slowing down to really think about why that cover is the way it is. That's a strategy of moving forward. Another exercise is just take a photograph a day. I participated in this exercise. I was taking a photograph a day, and I did it for quite a few months.

I can't say I made it through the full year, but when I took a photo a day, I started seeing the world just a little differently. It was more intentional, that I was noticing things that I had never noticed before because I was trying to apply these different visual principles together and being able to try to take better photos, but as a result, I got to see the world just a little differently. When we're working with images, we can also do this in the classroom, where we can create mind maps of information.

We can take a lecture and break it out visually and see what the relationship is by using Post-it Notes, getting out a whiteboard and kind of drawing it out. We can turn something that's a narration and turn it into a visual object and that's another strategy to apply. I would also encourage you just to go out and read up on some of these topics and then challenge yourself to go and see if you can find, identify images that will fit that particular exercise, that particular principle.

Briggs, who we talked about earlier in that article of the importance of visual literacy and ways to cultivate visual literacy. She offers-- Well, I can't say she, Saga Briggs offers strategies to do this. First of all, one of the strategies is to just provide a photograph with no captions, no text and let the students take a look at this and see what kind of meaning they could come to based on just looking at the photo without having any context near it.

When you are, say, teaching poetry, also have students find visuals that support the writing that they're doing. One of the other topics that Briggs mentioned was to stop using the idea of visual aids, that they're not visual aids. Visual literacy sits upon its own pedestal, and it should be there weighted against what we have typically done in terms of narration. It should be an intentional part of getting the message across and it's not necessarily something that's strapped on later.

Try to replace what you would normally put up on a slide with text, those serious ideas or concepts, but instead try to capture it with an image. Real quick, here's some exercises that you can use in your classroom. One is analyze a photo and part of this, there was a link to a worksheet that you can use that was quite informative for

analyzing a photo. That you present a photo and have students fill out this worksheet. I will put that into the show notes, so you'll have it available.

It starts out, what do you notice? Immediately, what are you getting from this particular photo? Then it's a matter of taking inventory of the elements. Every photo has certain elements that are on there, and it's just a matter of taking an inventory. Then, from that inventory, what does this all mean? If you take a look at this worksheet, I think you'll immediately get what it's trying to do, and it can be very useful for dissecting those particular images.

Another thing that you could do, an image changes meaning if it's cropped, and cropped means that you may start with a large photo of, say, a crowd and what you want to do is change the perspective or change the frame, so that you're only getting maybe one of those students out of that whole crowd. Showing a photo before it's been cropped and understanding what the meaning is, and then very selectively crop into something very specific and talk about how does this change the meaning.

The same thing with Photoshop, that often photos are changed, that they are touched up. Being able to show a before and after and, once again, discuss how has this meaning changed? There are some very famous photos that have been doctored. Basically, something has been added to them or somebody has been removed from a photo. There are many cases of that where individuals have been removed, they no longer exist.

If you can find some of those photos, show those photos and discuss why it was doctored. What was the meaning or purpose for doing that? What was the intent behind it. Pulling images from the news and maybe go through different news sites if they're covering the same event and seeing basically the same event in different images? How does that change and why were those specific images selected and in some cases, manipulated.

Pulling out magazine covers, doing a comparison of magazine covers or the design aspects of those covers. Man, I have colors in my head. What was the meaning? Why did they specifically choose those? Same with editorial cartoons. This last exercise is taken from *Common Core in Action: 10 Visual Literacy Strategies* by Todd Finley. What the strategy is, is you go ahead and put an image where the class can see it and have a Google Doc that's accessible to all the students and have the students write into that Google Doc.

Maybe give them five minutes to write what they think is important about that document, and then take all that text and drop it into a word cloud, to see what point was emphasized and use that to help summarize your conversation. Those are just some thoughts about visual literacy, and why it's important, why we should be using it in our classroom or emphasizing. I mean, we already are using it, but why it should be emphasized more and some exercises that you can use. Before you go, I have a quick plug for my book.