Integrating Visual Literacy Skills into PK-12 Education by Teresa Farrell

Teresa Farrell

Abstract

First person encounters with educational issues can often lead to reform, and Eastern Oregon University assistant professor, Teresa A. Farrell describes how her personal experience with Visual Literacy is the driving force behind her ongoing action research in the field. As a faculty member in a graduate level teacher preparation program, she has an opportunity to study various methodologies in order to better determine how to promote and increase Visual Literacy skills. A particular focus is on Visual Literacy and its relevancy to PK-12 education in regard to critical thinking, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and communication. In this paper, primary research in practice and measurement is shown as a basis for teacher preparation and professional development. The paper includes specific suggestions for PK-12 activities aligned with CCSS.

Introduction

My journey began in 2003 with photographer Dorothea Lange. The question at hand: Why can't first year undergraduate composition students write a visual analysis of a Dorothea Lange photograph? I mean, how hard can it be to talk about frame, vertical and horizontal formats, size, distance, angle, use of black and white/color, genre, image as metaphor, image as argument, emotional response, and evaluation (Barrett, 1990)? At the time, my colleagues and I discussed the gap between descriptive and argumentative writing, but we missed the mark completely. What was missing then was any recognition of Visual Literacy (VL) ability. Today I look back and am beleaguered by our ignorance. Unfortunately, I don't think a lot has changed in this respect. I suspect that English and writing teachers continue to ask students to perform this type of task without providing any

solid foundation and practice in VL skills. Pardon me if I offend, but this borders on educational malpractice, and it needs to stop.

This point was driven home for me, personally, in my doctorate program. I was assigned a visual rhetorical analysis and chose Virginia Schau's 1954 Pulitzer Prize winning *Rescue on Pit River Bridge*. I found myself at a total loss when trying to analyze the photograph due to the fact that I had never taken photography or visual composition. I could relate to it emotionally and had a lot of success in researching how the photograph was taken and about the location, but had little understanding of how to discuss it beyond that. How then, could I ever expect to give this kind of assignment to my students?

Background

The foundational work for this ongoing action research provided a theory base and descriptive statistics to warrant further investigation. Through the use of Avgerinou's VL Index (2007), a national study revealed three areas of weakness demonstrated by the participants in terms of VL ability: concrete concepts, defined concepts, and higher order rules (Farrell, 2013; Farrell, 2015). Avgerinou (2007) had identified six critical VL abilities, and five of them were represented in the three weak areas. Here I focus on the two critical VL abilities that apply directly to visual analysis which are defined by Avgerinou & Knight (2004) as the following:

- Constructing Meaning—the ability to construct meaning for a given visual message on the evidence of any given visual (and perhaps verbal)
- Critical Viewing—applying critical thinking skills to visuals (Baca, 1990, p. 68)

Previous studies have also pointed to participants lacking skills in these two abilities.

Considine, Horton and Moorman (2009) identify the millennial generation using Prensky's term "digital natives," which signifies how at ease this generation is in a digital environment. Although they may be able to use digital tools in a fluent manner, Considine, et al. (2009) indicate that these digital natives lack the critical engagement with media to allow them the ability to "interrogate media texts along with the context in which they are both created and consumed" (p. 472). Neil Postman noted this same phenomenon. Postman (1985) posited that the general public does not

engage critically with the discourse of television. He maintained that television is a vehicle for entertainment, but it is being used for market advertising, journalism, and education, which do not share the same discourse. In light of Visual Literacy, a similar trend exists: young people are bombarded by images and produce images regularly without giving particular credence to the discourse of images.

The belief that there is a gap in students being critically engaged with visual images is also voiced by Ron Bleed (2005) of Maricopa Community Colleges. Bleed noted that, "A shift to a new form of literacy is required for three reasons…the changing nature of the younger generation…the adoption of technology that supports the 21st century skill sets…[and] the desire to create artistic work, tell stories, and combine human interactions" (p. 3).

In our current K-12 educational system, it is uncommon to see Visual Literacy taught to the extent identified by the aforementioned authors. This is the reason why I am providing my graduate level pre-service teachers with training in basic VL skills and designing VL integration across the curriculum for their middle/secondary classrooms. My research is ongoing and action based, as I desire to pinpoint the methods and assignments most relevant to PK-12 students.

Ongoing Research

I determined, through my initial observations, that my MAT (Master of Arts in Teaching) students struggle with visual analysis. In particular, they have limited previous experience working with elements of visual composition, so it is just as difficult for them as it was for me to analyze a photograph. They, however, are good at researching the history of the photo and providing their own response to a visual. This is not surprising, as historical research is fairly commonplace and emotional response to visual images is subjective. Therefore, to enhance their VL and expand their understanding, my goal is to provide my MATs with the following concepts:

- History of VL
- Theory base
- Practical application
- Practice with developing skills
- Standards & lesson planning
- Why VL is important to society

I favor a language-based approach and infuse my communication theory background into my teaching so that my students begin to see how visuals very often are used as a form of communication. In particular, I use Austin (1955) and Gould (1995) and their notion of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts in combination with the rhetorical triangle as presented by Hesford and Brueggemann (2007) in order to drive home the point that images do not always have a message to transmit to the viewer. Often the artist creates an image to express an emotion with no audience in mind (Farrell, 2013). This is an important basis for learning how to read images, along with Langer (1957) and the concept that language is based on sequence while visuals are simultaneous. A final emphasis is placed upon the fact that image reading involves multiple perspectives from multiple viewers as denoted in States (1992) and the concept of "frontality" (Farrell, 2013, pp. 12-13).

The emphasis on standards in education fully supports the inclusion of VL across the curriculum, and I give my students opportunities to explore the standards in order to identify where VL is explicitly stated and where it is implied. Once this is done, students can begin to design content area learning experiences with a VL basis. This is done in all content areas and can be accomplished at all grade levels.

Visual Literacy Skills and Standard Alignment

A few easy to integrate activities are included in order to demonstrate how content and VL can be aligned to help students develop in both areas simultaneously. The following suggestions can certainly be adapted across content and grade levels. Included are the grade level, the number related to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a brief description of the activity, and the means for measuring VL.

Pre-reading Level: (CCSS K.RL. & RI.1, 2, 3, & 7)

- Have students tell the story of a picture book; ask questions:
    - "Why did you decide to tell that part of the story that way?"
    - "How do you know that happened?"
- Measure if they are able to support their story with elements of the pictures
- Measure their reasoning skills as they answer the questions

Early Elementary: (CCSS 3.RL.7 & 3.RI.7)

- Explore the elements of design
- Ask students to use those concepts and terms to analyze the illustrations in a picture book & how those illustrations reinforce the story told in words
    - Choose an illustrator who includes many elements
- Assess on their ability to name specific elements correctly & to accurately use those elements to support their ideas

Middle School: (CCSS 7.RL.7 & RI.7)

- Provide a piece of writing (poem, narrative, informative) that is descriptive in nature
- Have students rewrite the passage in a paraphrased manner (to check for understanding)
- Provide a picture that shows essentially the same thing as the writing
- Discuss the similarities and differences
    - Ask, "Is one form more effective than the others?"
- Measure the student's ability to provide an image that is closely related to the text
- Measure the student's ability to provide evidence for the choices s/he has made

High School—(CCSS 11-12.RI.1, RI.2, RI.7, W.2, W.7, W.8, W.10)

- Explain Picture This: Representing Others
    - from Faigley, George, Palchik, & Selfe, 2004, *Picturing Texts* (pp. 304-305)
- Have students conduct a content analysis of how their student body is represented through images in various publications (yearbooks, websites, newspapers)
- Have students write an article for the school newspaper reporting their findings
    - Measure their ability to accurately analyze the data

Conclusion

Although the United States has not yet required VL throughout the curriculum overtly, it is becoming more and more apparent that we must address the lack of VL skills in our PK-12 students and the demands both of the CCSS and of society. In order to better approach this issue, we should

focus on teacher preparation in VL, professional development in VL for licensed teachers, and purposeful PK-12 instruction. If we do, then the not too distant future should see students who can complete a visual analysis with relative ease, and then those skills can be applied to the even more crucial ability to critically engage with visuals that carry a specific argumentative/persuasive purpose.

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