“YOU GOTTA SEE IT TO BELIEVE IT: TEACHING VISUAL LITERACY IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

By teaching students how to read and view all texts critically, not just the traditional print texts, teachers can build upon the skills students need to read and write, increasing their literacy levels in all areas.

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WHY VISUAL LITERACY?

- Literacy is now a fluid concept determined by cultural context (Williams, 2004)
- With this in mind, students need instruction in analyzing and creating a variety of texts in different ways (Seglem and White, 60).
- Visual Literacy was originally recognized as the ability for someone to discriminate and interpret visuals encountered in the environment as fundamental to learning (Debes, 1969.)
- Three categories emerged in the 80s and 90s:
  - Human abilities
  - The promotion of ideas
  - Teaching strategies (60).
  - Best definition, “Visual Literacy is the ability to understand and use images, including the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images.
Helping students to understand the diversity of print and non-print texts as well as the visual connections that can be made between them is a practical way to connect the concrete and abstract thinking of students who struggle to make meaning from text (Seglem and White, 61).

Visualization and the creation of visuals allow students to read, respond, analyze, organize and represent the learning that is taking place (61).

Visualization strategies can do the following:
- Heighten motivation, engagement, and enjoyment of reading
- Immerse students in rich details of the text
- Improve literal comprehensions of texts
- Build background knowledge
- Aid in identifying important details to form inferences, elaborations, and patterns across multiple texts
- Help in solving spatial and verbal problems
- Improve a reader’s ability to share, critique, and revise what has been learned with others (Gambrell & Koskinen, 2002; Keene and Zimmermann, 1997; Wilheml, 1995)
TATTOOS

- Tattoos are one of the most exciting forms to today’s youth.
- Like a modern-day coat-of-arms.
- Normal Rockwell painting the “Tattoo Artist.” Scene of a Navy sailor getting a tattoo of his newest girlfriend’s name. Above it are the names of past flames.
- Seglem and White engaged their class in discussion about the narrative of the painting as well as the permanence and health risks of tattoos.
- Students were then asked to design a hypothetical personal tattoo.
COLLAGES

- Students avoid research and often times turn to plagiarism.
- Collages are an excellent way for students to break the linear path and incorporate visuals into the research process.
- Students were asked to select a topic and search for information. Students were then asked that instead of taking notes to flip through magazines to locate images to represent the key facts.
- Students were forced to make connections between their background knowledge as they worked to make connections between the images they discovered and the information they were trying to communicate.

The Painting/Collage *Das Undbild*, 1919 ("The And-Picture") Source: Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994
PAINTINGS

Their class created a symbolic representation of a novel in the form of an 11x14” painting.

Given a series of guiding questions (63):

- When you think of your book, what is the overall feeling you walk away with?
- Which scenes in the book are attributed to this feeling?
- What is the overall theme or message of the book?
- They discussed symbolism and how to use concrete symbols to represent the abstract idea presented in the books.

Elaine of *Seinfeld* worked for the J. Peterman Company where she wrote narrative descriptions of items in the catalog.

Seglem and White discovered that the J. Peterman Company was real and ordered a catalog and brought it into class.

They had their students write personal narratives about fictional items for the J. Peterman catalog.

“The mind engages in thinking, it distributes information across other people and various symbols, tools, objects, and technologies (Gee 2000).”

 Retrieved from [www.StevenNeuman.com](http://www.StevenNeuman.com)
POETRY COMICS

- Graphic novels are extremely popular.
- Librarians and book stores have difficult keeping graphic novels, whether it be the Japanese manga comics or the Americanized versions on their shelves.
- Manga offers a unique multimodal reading
- Seglem and White asked the students to create comics about complex poems such as Walt Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” and T.S. Eliot’s, “The Naming of Cats.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

- By teaching students how to critically read and view all texts, not just the traditional print texts, teachers can build upon the skills needed to read and write, increasing students’ literacy levels in all areas (65).

- Ultimately, however, visual literacy must be included within all school curricula if teachers want to adequately prepare students for a world that is surrounded and driven by images (65).
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What skills would a visually literate student possess in the classroom? In life outside of the classroom?