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Publication Details

McKenzie, B. (2007). Re-framing primary school visual literacy: enrichment from interdisciplinary approaches. 1st Global Conference: Visual Literacies: Exploring Critical Issues (pp. 1-12). UK: Mansfield.

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Re-framing Primary School Visual Literacy: Enrichment from Interdisciplinary Approaches

McKenzie, B.

Abstract

Currently the education field in Australia¹ tends to view the concept of Visual Literacy² in terms of a grammatical framework³. While use of this type of construct can provide students of all ages and stages with a meta-language to enable them to identify and discuss various aspects of visual literacy, it is far from the only way to 'frame' the concept of visual literacy. Some researchers⁴ in fact question the notion that applying this type of framework to visual images is either possible or desirable⁵. There is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of teaching children to think critically about visual images⁶ and the ways they can serve to position the reader/viewer. Empowering children to respond variously to these images⁷ depending upon the range and type of visual media they encounter may require more knowledge and tools than those contained within a grammatical framework. There are a number of disciplines including for example those of art, anthropology, cultural studies, communication studies, narrative, philosophy and media studies that have knowledge that could enrich the ways that we currently view visual literacy in education in Australia. This paper forms part of a symposium that seeks to engage in a dialogue with researchers from these disciplines in order to develop a richer, deeper and more eclectic approach for teaching our children about Visual Literacy.

1. Visual Literacy and Australian classrooms

There is as yet little formal teaching of visual literacy being undertaken in Australian classrooms. Informally, however many teachers are focussing upon some of the precepts of visual literacy in an effort to counteract the type of visual images their students are being exposed to that flow from media and their on line leisure time activities⁸.

Many of these sources are utilizing visual images in sophisticated ways⁹ to promote a product or a service in promotional campaigns directed towards children in a specified age group or demographic. Children may be exposed to these images as they watch their favourite television program followed by a commercial promoting the latest action figure available at a fast food outlet. The wide range of games available for PS3 (PlayStation Three) across all age groups and ability levels also uses visual images and many of the concepts of visual literacy to engage viewer's attention. The visual has been used for many years by the print media in the form of comics, newspapers, magazines and advertising for example to both influence and inform. The rise and rise of the Internet has also seen an increase in our children's ability to access and be influenced by a vast array of visual images. This has led to some researchers identifying that we are becoming an increasingly visual world.

In addition to the influences of television, the World Wide Web has unleashed a flood of visual images, the likes of which we have never seen...¹⁰.

These researchers contend that more than at any time in the past, this increase in visual complexity, has created a world where being visually literate is becoming more necessary than ever before¹¹. It is true however, that some¹² would disagree with these types of generalisations regarding the visual complexity of our world¹³. Nevertheless, it is clear that changes in technology have led to changes in our views of what it means to be a literate individual in the twenty-first century.

Classroom teachers need to provide their students with the means to become more empowered by providing them with the skills, knowledge and understanding that access to the precepts of visual literacy could provide. It is important that students are taught to think critically about the visual information they encounter and the ways by which it works to position them as readers/viewers. This is not to say that I am advocating that classroom teachers simply increase the range and type of texts now viewed in classrooms, include a greater diversity of media, and then initiate and scaffold children in a general discussion. What I am suggesting is an integration or combination of critical and visual literacies where focussed questioning, led by the teacher, provides children with the tools and experience to understand and discuss how visual images 'work' to influence, position and persuade

2. Dissenting Viewpoints About Visual Literacy

Currently, one of the most accepted ways to define, interpret and discuss visual literacy in the Australian context is through the use of a grammatical framework. This view of visual literacy flows from a semiotic viewpoint¹⁴, the use of a particular approach both methodologically and analytically to consider how we use signs in our society¹⁵. Here connections are made between the ability to understand and discuss language in its textual form and a similar ability to understand and discuss visual images¹⁶. A number of researchers¹⁷ are proponents of this viewpoint¹⁸. Several researchers who hold this view use precepts from systemic functional linguistics to explore the syntactic relationships within images¹⁹. To this end they have developed a type of visual grammar²⁰ in order to explore²¹, understand²² and discuss the creation of visual images²³.

However, the ability of semiotics to be used in this way to analyse visual images is widely disputed by a number of other researchers. Shirato and Webb while acknowledging the role of semiotics in meaning making, warn "...a sign means 'something', not 'one thing.'" ²⁴. They argue that we have recently moved from viewing visual images through other rule based systems towards privileging a linguistic view and identify a movement from:

...within the Humanities to focus almost exclusively on literary texts, and to use the analytical devices associated with literary texts to make sense of society, visual images, individual psychology... ²⁵.

Mitchell argues that the same techniques that serve semiotics so well when related through linguistics to language²⁶, just can't be applied with the same regularity to the visual. Elkins too²⁷, holds the view that visual images and language are not the same '...images are not language, and pictures are not writing' ²⁸ and also rejects the semiotic stance in connection to visual literacy. In his later work, Mitchell ²⁹ calls for equal rights for pictures:

Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the 'sign', or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language ³⁰.

So, given the diversity of viewpoints about how to explore, discuss and understand visual images, how do classroom teachers best approach the teaching of visual literacy? In the main, primary schools continue to be places where text is privileged over image³¹ with many teachers ascribing to this viewpoint. However, increasingly the reality for the children they teach, is a need to understand how the visual images they encounter daily, work to influence choices and behaviours in a variety of areas³².

3. How is Visual Literacy Defined?

As a result of this collision of differing views about how to analyse and critically discuss visual images, a dilemma has been created for both educators and classroom teachers alike. University educators who understand the necessity of ensuring their pre-service teachers have access to knowledge and understandings about how to discuss, critique and teach the precepts of visual literacy are faced with a lack of cohesion at best- a clash of world views if you will, that in Australia has resulted in the use of a visual grammar as the accepted way to teach about visual literacy. The classroom teacher is also faced with a dilemma. While some of the aspects of a visual grammar are at least a starting point, a way to introduce and discuss visual images in their classroom context, where do they access additional information?

Opportunities to identify and discuss the skills and knowledge needed to become visually literate abound in classrooms of all ages and stages. These skills are used by the illustrators who created the images that student's access daily as they interact with picture books in the classroom. Similar skills are utilised in web page design and prevalent in assorted computer images students encounter as they research using the Internet. Gee argues for the need for students to become visually literate and holds the view that this needs to assume various forms³³ depending upon the type of visual media being encountered. He warns that in the type of multimodal texts often encountered by students in classroom situations:

...the images often communicate different things from the words.
And the combination of the two modes communicates things that
neither of the modes does separately³⁴.

Many of the principles of visual literacy are encountered by students through artworks, photography, and design of posters for advertising and in media studies generally. To enable and encourage students to think critically and engage in discussion around these visual texts classroom teachers need to develop a meta-language to facilitate and frame discussion. Given the conflicting views regarding a definition of visual literacy, in the interests of clarity, the following definition with its educational focus will be used in this paper. Visual literacy is:

...the ability to construct meaning from and into visual images within a particular world-view that is influenced by the elements of culture, values and ideologies. It includes the ability to read and construct a variety of visual texts such as signs, images and pictures, and to understand the significance of conventional elements and their composition in images³⁵.

4. Introducing Visual Literacy into the Classroom

Using a functional semiotic grammatical framework to identify and discuss visual images in the classroom involves looking at these images through a number of frames. In the classroom, this could see a teacher perhaps using picture books to focus upon some of the ways the illustrations serve to position a reader/viewer. Several aspects of the illustrations could be used as a focus for classroom discussion and students provided with opportunities to replicate some of these ideas into their own illustrations. The types of frames used include a focus on a representational aspect, an interactive aspect and a compositional aspect.

The representational aspect in an image involves the viewer considering the events, the participants and/or objects within the image and the circumstances that surround these. Some of these combinations could be demonstrated through action while others may be symbolic.

Line: Can be used in illustrations either explicitly or more subtly. Line is used by illustrators to denote movement, direction, energy and emotion and often this is most easily seen in comics. In *Rosie's Walk* for example, line is used to indicate movement in the fifth double page opening as frogs leap from the rocks and the bird flies from the tree as Fox stalks Rosie and lands in the pond. Line can also be used more subtly as a type of vector or way to lead the viewer's eye towards a given point. In the second double page opening the Fox, suspended in mid-flight gazes at a rake on the ground. The viewer's eye is drawn to his gaze and we complete the vector of his gaze and predict his obvious collision with the rake. Line can be either thick or thin, vertical or

horizontal and choices that illustrators make work to position reader/viewers and lead them to specific parts of the illustration. For example in the first double page spread of *Tracks* we are led to the image of Joel by the use of line in the form of the tent rope and tent opening. Often line is used more subtly and the line is an implied one and created by the contours of the land or a stand of trees to draw our eye³⁶ towards action or a character. In *Rosie's Walk* this is achieved by the placement of the farm buildings, the fence, the pond and contours of the hill to lead the eye onwards.

An interactive relationship between the image and the viewer is constructed through the type of power relationships represented within an image. For example, the use of high or low angles suggests some participants are more or less powerful than others. Relationships can also be suggested through the use of the proxemics of the image to the viewer via the use of close up, medium or long shots. Relationship can also be created through the use of a particular technique such as the use of texture.

Texture: This technique is increasingly used by a number of illustrators to build an emotional connection between the illustration and the reader/viewer. The work of Eric Carle and Jeannie Baker most readily come to mind in this connection. However texture can be implied in other ways than those used in the collage techniques preferred by Baker and Carle. Anthony Browne implies texture in the nineteenth single page opening of *Zoo* and in the dejected figure of the Orangutan we feel like we can almost reach out and touch the coarse tangle of his fur beneath our fingers. Browne repeats this in the twenty-first single page opening where we are confronted by a full- face portrait of a gorilla with facial hair and skin so lifelike we expect to be able to feel these differences. Texture can also be created by the use of cross-hatching techniques such as those used prominently in *Rosie's Walk*.

Gaze: A method often used by image-makers to create a feeling of an interpersonal relationship between viewer and image. Browne does this in many of his books. For example, in his portrait of the gorilla identified earlier, Browne has positioned the image so that the viewer is challenged by the direct eye-level gaze of a caged gorilla.

Compositional aspects of an image concern aspects such as layout as well as how value is ascribed to particular aspects of the image.

Colour: One of the most obvious of the visual elements used to position a reader/viewer is that of colour. Specific colours are chosen to indicate or reflect emotion³⁷ or to establish a mood or emotional theme throughout the

text. It is important to remember that when using picture books the illustrations themselves can be viewed as a narrative, not simply a series of disconnected illustrations³⁸. Thought of this way, it may be easier to identify how the illustrations signal a change in mood in differing parts of the narrative. Some ways to focus on the use of colour in illustrations includes identifying whether the colour is from the cool or warmer parts of the palette. The warmer colours are hues associated with red and often linked with anger or danger while those at the opposite end of the palette, or blue hues are often associated with serenity³⁹.

Colour can be used also to indicate a sense of cohesiveness between aspects of an illustration or alternatively to signal disharmony. For example in *Zoo*, Browne has used the colour of their clothing in the first opening to signal connections between the father and sons, while the mother figure is dressed in less vibrant colours. This is repeated again in the second single page opening where only the father and sons are shown and the surrounding cars again reflect the colours of the previous page. This sense of cohesion and disharmony is again repeated in the third single page where the father and sons are grouped standing together in line and the mother proxemically separate from the group. Browne often uses colour in his books to position the reader/viewer and identifying how he has achieved this in *Voices in the Park* can lead to lively classroom discussion.

Placement of colour can be used to privilege one part of an illustration over another by drawing the viewer's attention there. This can also be achieved by the use of a particular colour in relation to surrounding colours or even the quality and depth of a colour. The choice of specific mediums may also impact upon the intensity or luminosity of the colour used. The use of particular colours and mediums often form a part of the signature of specific illustrators. For example the use of a type of collage technique is common in the work of both Jeannie Baker and Eric Carle although the medium each uses to create these are very different.

5. Re-framing Visual Literacy: Interdisciplinary Enrichment

Earlier in this paper I referred to the value of integrating concepts of both critical and visual literacy to create classroom tools to encourage students to discuss how visual images 'work' to position, influence and persuade. My concern is that in Australia, these tools appear to be almost exclusively framed by a functional semiotic viewpoint.

Elkins too, speaks of tools, in the context of a 'toolbox of interpretations'⁴⁰ and advocates that these interpretations and understandings around the concept of visual literacy may flow from a number of wide ranging discipline areas. It is my hope that during the discussion that follows this presentation, and across the life of the conference, delegates from a range of disciplines will be encouraged to identify connections they would make from within their own discipline area that could serve to broaden and enrich our current views on visual literacy.

Notes

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