

Synthesis Paper: Learning with Images

The concept of teaching students using visual enhancements, diagrams, pictures and illustrations is not a new one, particularly in the field of special education. A learning disability, by definition, is a “neurological disorder [which] results from a difference in the way a person’s brain is wired” (What is a Learning Disability?, 2008). Therefore it stands to reason that traditional teaching styles may not be effective for students with these disabilities. At Morning Star school, it has been the policy of teachers for the last 5 decades, to educate students as individuals, in the way that best suits their needs. Often this means providing visual enhancements to all lessons. It is an understanding and expectation that all teachers will present material in a way that accommodates both auditory and visual learners.

In a school where one hundred per cent of students have a diagnosed learning disability it is interesting to note that a majority of these students have also been diagnosed with central auditory processing disorder (CAPD). Students with CAPD do not have a hearing problem yet they have trouble paying attention to and remembering material presented orally. They also have trouble following multistep directions and require additional time to process verbal information (Schminky & Baran, 1999). In some cases, CAPD is the only diagnosed disability and in such a case, students excel when information is presented visually. It is perhaps surprising at times, that all students in all schools are not educated in a more visually dominant way.

Research indicates that teaching using visual enhancements is beneficial to all students, not just those with learning disabilities. The Chanlin study compared lessons with no graphics, still graphics and animated graphics to evaluate the outcome on student learning. The study suggested that the “effectiveness of the visual design is related to the prior knowledge of the students” and that, “animated graphics were not superior to still graphics...” (Stokes, 2002). This information seems to suggest that when children are being introduced to a brand new topic, visual learning will provide the best outcome of understanding. It also confirms the experiences of Morning Star teachers that graphics do not have to be fancy to be effective. This information validates the following personal example:

In Florida History class, a student reads aloud to the class that residents of St. Augustine in the 1600s used palmetto leaves to make roofs on their homes. The teacher asks, “What might be the benefits and problems with this sort of cover.” The students are silent. One finally raises his hand, “It might take a long time to put all those little leaves on the roof.” He holds up his fingers to indicate a small leaf, perhaps the size of an oak leaf. The teacher replies, “Well palmetto leaves are much larger. Do you know what a palmetto leaf looks like?” The student’s have blank faces. “They are large green leaves with spiky edges.” But the teacher already knows this will not trigger understanding. She picks up a marker and draws a rough sketch of a palmetto leaf. Suddenly, understanding fills all the students. “We have those in my backyard!” one replies. Another student explains, “Those are all over my neighborhood.” The students are able to answer the original question based on the trigger provided by one simple and perhaps poorly drawn diagram which was more effective than any amount of verbal description of the object.

Students were not unable to answer the question despite the initial response. In fact, the students provided thoughtful and correct answers. It was one word that created the insurmountable barrier to understanding and the barrier disappeared with one simple drawing. Some may have concluded that the students were ignorant or poorly educated. Some may have passed judgment on the level of the students' intelligence. This example clearly illustrates the benefits of visual images not only to enhance learning but to gain a more accurate assessment of student abilities.

Visual organizers are also helpful for enhancing understanding. Story maps, flow charts and Venn diagrams are often used in the classroom to help students see how concepts are related. Whether a concept is complex or basic, students can benefit from seeing information presented in a logical, visual way. This is also validated through several pieces of research (Stokes, 2002). This type of visual presentation seems to be used more often in all classrooms, perhaps because it often involves higher order thought. It is important not to be trapped by the complexity (or lack thereof) of the visual assignment or presentation. Teachers may sometimes feel that they are doing the work for a student or that they are helping them too much if they present information visually or in a way that is not necessarily "higher order". However other teachers, particularly those who educate students with special learning needs, disagree. Any method that enhances learning should be used regularly in the classroom.

I believe that regardless of whether a person's predominant learning style is auditory, kinesthetic, visual or other, that all learning can be enhanced through visual images. While some highly auditory people may find images or diagrams distracting, it is fair to present information in multiple ways simultaneously for the benefit for all learners. I strongly agree with the author's conclusion that teachers should have the skills and techniques necessary to teach students visually. This is backed by my own personal experience and the experience of my colleagues. We have found time and time again that diagrams, animations, pictures, paintings, and even educational movies hold the attention of students for a longer period of time and promote the greatest understanding. While these beliefs have not been proven through research, it must be noted that the coping and adaptation skills that students have learned at Morning Star have allowed the majority of students to successfully complete high school and often college.

While I agree that visual learning greatly benefits students, the students must also learn to cope with auditory difficulties and master basic listening skills. A completely visual education is too much of a good thing. Students must force their minds to process spoken information since they will one day need to follow the instructions of a boss, take driving directions, write messages and other activities that all adults need to lead a successful life. I will continue to use visual images at the root of all lessons and continue my personal education on visual literacy so that the best, most useful techniques can be used to educate my students.

Works Cited

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