

Synthesis Paper: Visual Literacy

In the article “Considering Visual Literacy When Designing Instruction,” Michael Sankey impresses upon the reader the vital need to incorporate visual images in all school curriculums. While Suzanne Stokes seems to present the material in a more passive way, Sankey presents the concept of visual literacy in the imperative. Rather than discussing the merits of various studies, he creates an argument for an increase in visual communication and works to convince his readers that visual literacy is the future of education.

Sankey points to a cultural shift towards learning best through visual genres. While he does not come out to directly state it, one cannot help but ask if this single variant could bridge the gap between American schools and those in other countries. For years, politicians and educators alike have pointed to a widening gap between test scores of American children and their counterparts around the world. Could it simply be that our society is stubbornly standing by, refusing to educate children the way they are best taught? The answer, according to Sankey, seems to indicate that this is a possibility.

Perhaps the most obvious, yet shocking information comes at the end of the article. It is noted that young children learn predominantly through the use of visually rich texts. However, in the higher grades, it is not only unusual to find pictures and illustrations in texts; it is considered to be detrimental almost to the point of embarrassing to educate older children with pictures. Sankey cites an article by D. Spender (2000) which “suggests that there are educationalists who are horrified by these thoughts, and would see any addition of pictures to learning materials as ‘dumbing down’ academic content (Sankey 11). We as educators have a tendency to reward children when they progress towards books without pictures. At times, teachers may even require students pick a different book for a required report because the chosen book “has too many pictures.” Children have been raised to believe that picture books are for babies. In my professional experience, I have seen children with disabilities who will carry around books that are far too advanced for their individual reading level with the hopes of impressing peers into believing they are reading a “chapter book” which they will then open and thumb through to point out, “look, no pictures”. The end result is that no book is read at all.

Sankey convincingly argues the point that educators must be aware of the changing learning needs of students and rise to meet those needs rather than try to discourage them. Western culture has created a visually rich society. Children are exposed earlier and earlier to computers, video games, and television. Whether or not these things are positive is a matter of opinion. However, children are also given the most visually stimulating toys starting at the earliest possible ages. Parents purchase infant toys with colorful patterns, lights, music and motion and few dispute the positive value of such toys. Children learn from an early age to discover the world visually. It only makes sense to continue down this path in education, allowing children to learn through visual means. Yet, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, there comes a time when children are expected to learn almost exclusively through text and lecture. With that idea come teachers who cannot imagine teaching any other way.

With cultural change comes resistance. There are many teachers in the American school system who stand by traditional practices regardless of the needs of a student. These teachers believe that visually enhancing the curriculum would in fact be “dumbing down” the material. Perhaps the greatest point to take from the article is that all educators must work to change their view on the best way to reach children or at the very least, accept alternative methods as having some merit. From the somewhat more unique perspective of a Catholic school educator, I see coworkers so set in their ways that change will only come to their classrooms upon their retirement. My knowledge of public school happenings comes only from speaking with parents whose children attend these schools and friends who work in public schools. It seems that public schools, at least in the local district, are more inclined to adjust teaching methods to meet the research like that which is presented in the Sankey article. Without making unnecessary generalizations, it seems from my personal observation, that Catholic schools are less likely to pressure teachers to change curriculum to add visually rich tools and techniques to class lessons. Catholic schools pride themselves on being tougher, stricter and more traditional than public schools. Perhaps parents prefer these methods and select such schools for that purpose however, it would be interesting to compare students following the traditional Catholic school curriculum against students who receive instruction with added visual elements. In any case, the conclusions of the Sankey article are worth sharing with administrators and coworkers to encourage the notion that change is inevitable and allowing for that change will benefit teachers, students and society in the end.

I plan to present the information from both the Stokes and the Sankey article to my coworkers at our monthly staff meeting. Each month one teacher is in charge of presenting an article for professional development. My opportunity comes in March. Along with the material I also plan to include copies of the two lesson plans I created for the course and provide a list of other suggested activities and websites. It is my belief that this will help teachers incorporate more visual lessons into their classes. In some respects I will be “preaching to the choir” as Morning Star does an exceptionally good job of accommodating visual learners and has done so for many years already. It is our neighboring regular education school with whom we share a campus that needs this information. I plan pass this information on to one of the teachers I know at the other school.

Furthermore, this course has given me several new ideas for lessons and ways to incorporate photography into my curriculum. I will continue to use the camera in the classroom as often as possible. Another simple thing I can do is to use the pictures in the textbooks more frequently so that children learn not only to use the images and diagrams to but to interpret them correctly. A vast majority of my students learn best visually however there are a small percentage of those who do not interpret images correctly. These students often have difficulty with social skills because they are unable to read facial expressions and body language. They have particular difficulty looking at pictures in textbooks and identifying the artist’s intent. It is important to provide these students with extra assistance so that they can learn to use pictures for maximum effectiveness. If our culture is changing then I can best serve my students by rising to meet those changes.

Works Cited

Sankey, M. D. (2002). Considering Visual Literacy When Designing Instruction. *The e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology* , 1-14.

Stokes, S. (2002). Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective. *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education* , 10-19.