Chapter 13
Visual Literacy and its Impact on Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the importance of visual literacy in teaching and learning using multiple literacies as a main framework. Its goals are: (1) to explore visual literacy as a critical literacy in teaching and learning and (2) to share the perceptions of teacher education candidates' understandings and uses of visual literacy. From the research, nine visual literacy competences were developed and used to analyze these perceptions in a pilot study. Findings indicate that most participants operate in lower levels of the visual literacy competences, e.g., 'identify, translate, and access'. Most participants realized the significant role of visual images in their own learning and teaching and the need for higher levels of visual competencies. Based upon the findings of the study and review of the research literature, it appears logical that visual literacy should be taught to develop the ability to incorporate, analyze and integrate to enhance verbal literacies.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities and social trajectories of individuals and groups. (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/21stcentdefinition)

The term "Visual Literacy" was first coined in 1969 by John Debes, one of the most important figures in the history of visual literacy. Debes' defines visual literacy as:

Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication (Fransecky & Debes, 1972, p. 7).

Burmark (2002) defines visual literacy as the ability to see, understand, read and interpret, communicate using visual tools, and to think, create and communicate visually. The visually literate person is the one who sees the meaning behind images, examines images carefully and critically, and uses and creates visually rich material.

Yet, a question teachers still have is, "Can a visually literate learner understand and do what the verbally literate learner can?" Fransecky and Debes (1972) argue that both the visual and verbal language involve thought processes which precede speech and writing (visual and verbal). Language has a deep structure (a process of growth), and a surface structure (sounds, visual symbols) in order to communicate. A good visual statement – a picture, painting, or film – begins with an underlying idea – a kind of deep structure – from which the communicator develops a surface structure of visual presentation.

A useful and important distinction should be made for students and teachers between structure and skills in visual literacy. The basic structure of visual language is a set of relationships between visual thinking, visual reading, and visual writing – the structure of discourse itself. The visual skills are used to develop a skill base to help learners generate visual language statements, photographs, films, and etc. It is vital to make the distinction without fragmenting visual learning; rather, connections between structure and skills must constantly be clarified (Fransecky & Debes, 1972).

The main purpose of this chapter is to explore the importance of visual literacy in teaching and learning using multiple literacies as a main framework and present findings of a study exploring the uses and perceptions of visual literacy in teacher preparation. For many years, schools have concentrated on the verbal components and skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Fransecky & Debes, 1972). The skills of visual literacy have traditionally been set aside as "extra" or reserved for those with "talent." Recently, educators have begun to realize that this virtual/informational age requires visual as well as verbal skills, and the verbal and visual skills are interconnected and both must be developed and or learned. Thus, the authors will argue that the visual literacy, the nonverbal and a major component of multiple literacies, could be the foundation for verbal literacy in the informational age.

BACKGROUND

In this section, multiple literacies are reviewed as the foundation for exploring the visual literacy in teaching and learning. Then, visual literacy will be reviewed under the umbrella of multiple literacies. In the visual literacy review section, nine visual literacy competences are introduced as a framework for this study.

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