Visual Literacy and the Content Classroom: A Question of Now, Not When

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Clearly one would have to be naive not to recognize the important influence visual culture is having on the current generation of children and youth who are native to the Internet and the digital world. The digitally connected world is here and now, and content teachers should take heed to make their instruction relevant to the lives of their students.

Jakes (2007) noted that students use, explore, and create visual content with or without the assistance of teachers or the school. Therefore, we would like to posit that successful content teachers recognize the influence of the Internet and visual culture and utilize both to capitalize on student interests and technological skills by integrating visual literacy instruction into their curriculum.

Why Visual Literacy

Visual culture is a constant in students' daily lives. As a group they spend more time watching television and interacting with a computer or other devices such as smart phones or netbooks than attending school (Avgerinou, 2009). If youths are spending that much time in what O'Brien (2001) called the "mediasphere," then Felten's (2008) admonition for the need to provide visual literacy instruction is critical, because "living in an image rich world…does not mean students naturally possess sophisticated visual literacy skills, just as continually listening to an iPod does not teach a person to critically analyze or create music" (p. 60).

A recent study sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation (2008) on teens and their use of digital media found that youths are developing important social and technical skills by themselves that adults don't often understand or value. In the study, friendship and interests motivated youths' online engagement. The results reported suggested that (a) there is a generation gap in how youths and adults view the value of online activity, (b) young people are acquiring complex social and technology skills by participating online, (c) young people are receptive to learning from their peers online, and (d) most youths are not taking full advantage of opportunities afforded by the Internet.

As younger and younger students access, utilize, create, and manipulate information on the Web (Berson, 2009; Davis & McGrail, 2009), the challenge becomes how can teachers best design instruction to develop critical visual literacy skills and, in some instances, recapture the interests of the students they teach. Frand (2000) characterized the perceptions of today's digital students toward learning and the Internet with eight observations:

1. Computers aren't technology; they are an assumed part of life.
2. The Internet is better than television, because it allows users to socialize with others.
3. Reality is not viewed as being static due to digital and information manipulation.
4. Doing is more important than knowing, and results and actions are more important than accumulation of facts.

5. Learning more closely resembles video games than logic, because gaming requires a trial-and-error approach to learning as opposed to the traditional rule-based approach to problem solving.

6. Multitasking is a way of life, typing is preferred to handwriting, and keyboarding is an essential skill.

7. Staying connected is essential, and there is very little tolerance for delays.

8. Digital savvy students can be a consumer or a creator.

Thus, as Myatt (2008) noted, schools must move away from exclusive text-driven instruction in the content areas and incorporate technology, or else we may continue to see more students disconnected from traditional school-based learning and connected to the global reach of new media (O'Brien & Bauer, 2005).

Visual Literacy and the Content Classroom

Since there exists an opportunity to capitalize on the interconnection of children's everyday culture and their academic classroom culture (Alvermann & Hong Xu, 2003; Gee, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002), it would seem pertinent for teachers to integrate available information and communication technologies (ICTs) to help merge children's everyday literacies with the academic demands of the classroom. As teachers move away from what West (2004) asserted is the "medieval clerk" approach to reading, writing, counting, and memorizing texts and toward the integration of ICTs into their classrooms, the Internet influences not only how content teachers teach but also what they teach (Hull & Schultz, 2002).

The re-envisioned content classroom reflects what we know about how children best learn alongside access to technology. In the sections that follow, we outline a model of the ICT integrated classroom.

Purposeful Involvement

Authentic learning is the centerpiece of the ICT classroom. Students, teachers, and the community beyond interact as meaningful learning takes place. Learners are allowed to make connections through their own learning with other classrooms, schools, libraries, and the world beyond as they explore topics, create their own meaning, and arrive at new understandings. Whether teachers incorporate podcasting or allow students to design eye-catching visual displays of their learning that can be used as artifacts of their learning, the teacher's role is akin to an orchestra conductor.

Interpersonal Relationships

As noted earlier, children in the mediasphere embrace learning from one another. Just watch a group of youngsters determine how to "beat" a new video game if you question this premise. Thus, the environment of the content classroom embraces collaboration within and outside the classroom. The teacher is no longer the "sage on the stage" but rather the facilitator and co-learner. Whether students partner on a webquest project or actually brainstorm what topics they want to explore during a particular integrated unit of study, allowing students to plan, investigate, and produce together is a powerful classroom management and learning tool.

Development of Knowledge

The content classroom reflects the idea that no content area can be understood in isolation from other content areas, and connecting school learning with the current world is a critical motivator. As students learn both in real time and virtually, the meaning they construct invariably integrates information from various content areas and events. In turn, evidence of the knowledge and skills they gain are shared in nontraditional ways. Because this style of student-centered instruction allows for both choice and different levels of involvement, the knowledge students construct is culturally and personally relevant. As mentioned before, inquiry-based projects that capitalize on student interests can produce learning that is authentic, meaningful, and long lasting.

Clear Expectations and Feedback

As students assume responsibility for their own learning and meet established learning goals, the classroom environment and climate encourages them to seek constructive feedback, reflect on their own learning, assess their efforts, and make decisions

about future learning. The use of self and peer review rubrics or open-ended modes of presentation are examples of how a teacher can establish clear expectations and provide both peer and teacher generated feedback.

Why It's a Question of Now

More than 30 years ago, Ausburn and Ausburn (1978) identified potential benefits of visual literacy. They appear to be as pertinent today as they were then. The benefits of making our children visually literate include improvement in the following areas:

- Verbal skills
- Self-expression and ordering of ideas
- Student motivation and interest in a variety of subjects
- Chances of reaching the disengaged
- Self-image and relationship to the world
- Self-reliance, independence, and confidence

There is an ominous portent that needs recognition as more teachers and schools embrace ICTs in the content classroom and that is the potential for a digital achievement gap (Au, 2006). Our observations lead us to the conclusion that many rural and urban students today are being provided only limited opportunities to engage in using the Internet as part of their daily learning and knowledge construction. The potential of ICT use to help close the achievement gap between the haves and the have-nots has yet to be realized, but there is evidence that it can play a major role (Au, 2006).

We think that moving beyond content instruction based on traditional print media is one significant step teachers and schools can take toward stemming the tide against the large numbers of disengaged students. We must design instruction that reflects the mediasphere in which children and youths live. We encourage you to visit www.futureofed.org for an eye-opening vision of where learning could be moving by 2020.

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