



SUMMARY

In this increasingly multimedia and multidisciplinary world, classroom teachers working with visual arts specialists can create the kind of learning environment that will help students develop the literacy skills needed in the 21st century.

Patricia Barbanell, a member of NYSUT Retiree Council 12, has worked as a K-12 teacher of visual arts. A past president of the New York State Art Teachers Association, she currently serves as NYSATA's advocacy chair and ENEWS editor. She is a part-time college supervisor of art education student-teachers for the State University of New York at New Paltz and a member of NYSUT's Committee on the Visual and Performing Arts.

The Importance of the A in LiterAcy

In the digital

environment of the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly clear that the visual imagery: art (the A in LiterAcy) — with all it entails, including creativity, cognitive expansion, and literal and emotional expression — is essential in developing meaning through the written word. As written literacy integrates more seamlessly with formats such as on-line news, and Web-based archival sources, educators and students are finding that they must be able to both read the “written” words and decode the visual images that are often integral to them.

In seeking an understanding of literacy, education professionals are developing new approaches to meet the challenges of an increasingly multimedia, multidisciplinary world. Teachers, working to train students to understand and utilize the vast resources of digital media, are providing both methods to decode the meanings imbedded in the digital environment, and skills to create effective, literate digital content. As a result, the field of literacy has expanded to meet the demands, the realities, and the emerging needs of new constructs of knowledge, skills and under-

standings that are essential for literacy in the 21st century.

Expanded concepts of literacy have been around a long time. Yet their visions include ideas that are only now emerging into the mainstream. As far back as the 1970s, Paulo Freire (as referenced in Education Development Center, 2000) put forth the concept that “literacy is an active phenomenon, deeply linked to personal and cultural identity. Its power lies not in an ability to read and write but rather in an individual’s capacity to put those skills (reading and writing) to work in shaping the course of his or her own life.”

Literacy requires fertile ground in which to grow. Healy (1990) recognized that to enter into the world of literacy, children need help in developing the internal thought and language environment that can make the brain a comfortable place for real literacy to dwell. Through creative arts, students can develop the imaginative and creative skills and understandings that enable them to connect to the symbolic language (i.e., words and images that convey meaning) that emerge with growing up literate.

Comprehensive literacy in the digital environment

In the early stages of literacy development — i.e., early elementary school — students learn the symbolic meanings of letters and written words through illustrated texts. As their skills and capacities grow, they encounter more and more text-based content. Yet, in contemporary digital environments, the page organization and visual illustrations are increasingly core to comprehension of the written word. By necessity, students, as they grow, must continue to learn through integrated visual images, and, as a result, they must develop a comprehensive literacy that carries far beyond the basic text. Teachers can integrate explorations into content and meaning in written words that focus on visual aspects of digital literature.

Using interactive Web resources (such as <http://arturoartstories.org> or www.miscositas.com/stories.html) they can teach young students to function more fully in the digital environment. Furthermore, working with visual arts specialists, classroom teachers can set a learning environment that develops the literacy needed in the 21st century.

by Patricia Barbanell, Ph.D.
State University of New York at New Paltz

Linking Literature with Art

We must counter the pressure to narrowly define learning to read and write, and give children significant recognition for their exploration in all modes of representation.

— Curtis & Carter (2000)

As Curtis and Carter suggest, linking literature with art can be critical to helping students engage with written text. Thoughtful understanding involves the ability to enter into the created reality of a piece of literature — to visualize a location, to find meaning in a storyline, to establish internal connections to the literary personalities in the work, and to see in the mind's eye what the author has created. By integrating visual arts

instruction with the development of literacy skills, arts specialists and teachers can maximize the resources available for student learning.

Training students to 'read' visual images, to create their own visualizations and to use words and pictures to communicate those visualizations builds a structure of learning that stretches the scope of both the visual arts instruction and the literary arts content.

Many notable literacy scholars have supported the importance of using experiences in the visual arts to enhance the ability of students to develop literacy skills. Readers who cannot visualize their reading are unlikely to want to read (Eisner, 1992). As Wilhelm (1995, p.476)

reports, "One frustrated young reader, when asked his thoughts on a reading assignment, exploded: "I can't think about it, talk about it, do anything about it, if I can't see it!" Thus, it is clear that an important tool

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“Those who cannot imagine cannot read.”
— E.W. Eisner

METHODOLOGY

Developing multimodal comprehension

Teachers can structure lessons that help students develop their literary skills by conveying understanding through visual images. By incorporating visual exercises into lessons that develop student ability to understand and interpret the written word, teachers can help their classes to build skills that enable them to acquire a foundation in dealing with multimodal (combination of written, visual and sometimes auditory) content.

in literacy development is the motivation of students to create artwork in tandem with their reading development because such creative learning helps them to construct rich mental models as they read (Wilhelm, 1995). The skills developed in visual arts are synergistic with those for developing literacy. When students are observing, discussing, and reflecting on visual artwork, they are developing perception and visualization. They learn that, similar to the way that the written word consists of symbols (i.e., letters that make words and words that convey ideas) that communicate meaning, visual art consists of symbols (i.e., visual images) that transmit ideas, experience and feelings that can be shared (Honigman & Bahavnagri, 1998). When children have the opportunities to write in response to art, they are able to expand their inherent understanding of symbols (both literary and artistic). This activity enables them to apply their knowledge of reading in meaningful and purposeful ways (Braunger & Lewis, 1997).

Multimodal Literacy:

Has there ever been a time when we have not been awash in a remarkable torrent of symbols and opportunities for reading and writing them?

(William Kist, 2005, as quoted in NCTE Guidelines: Multimodal Literacies, p.1)

Multimodal literacy includes content across the curriculum that is created by the powerful overlapping of spoken, written, and artistic content communicated through and with digital media. Multimodal literacy — the ability to read, understand, analyze, explain, critically evaluate, create and appreciate the ways in which this multifaceted content makes meaning — is central to understanding and navigating the world in which we live.

Like many scholars, Kress (2003) suggests that an expanded understanding of literacy needs to look beyond the traditional symbols of language (i.e., the letters and the words with their literal and implied meanings), and encompass a broader assembly of literacy forms that include multiple symbol systems (written and spoken words, sound and image). A growing number of researchers and educators are calling for a multimodal perspective of literacy — “strategies for developing literacy practices that can be carried across multiple sites/texts/media, rather than a set of practices tied to specific sites.” (Adler-Kassner, quoted in NCTE, 2007).

This shift augurs a profound change in the nature of literacy. Teachers must abandon the uni-dimensional approaches to literature — the pedagogy of understanding the written word. They must expand their teaching



tool box to include the integrated study and comprehension of multimedia digital documents and resources. In other words, literacy, by necessity, in the 21st century, goes beyond the spoken and written word to a comprehensive, integrated set of skills, knowledge and understanding that enable students to communicate in the multimedia contemporary world.

In considering multimodal literacy, it is interesting to observe that children create meaning when they wish to communicate knowledge and to express their thoughts and reflections. (Kendrick & McKay, 2004). In telling stories, young children employ meaning constructs that are not necessarily reflected only as words. They often act out ideas, create music and sound effects, and create visual images that can convey how they think about the world, express

ideas, explain thoughts, and communicate with others. This fluid flow provides them with a foundation for developing true literacy.

In their early school years, children are asked to develop an understanding of literacy although their ability to use words in a traditional structure is rudimentary and limited. Kendrick and McKay (2004) argue that there is an urgent need for expanding school curricula with learning that can foster the expression and development of a full range of human emotions and experience. In their research, they point out how children productively can use drawing as a vehicle to express their learning of meaning through verbal literacy. In addition, their studies confirmed that drawing can provide an alternative way of understanding the written word.

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METHODOLOGY

Linguistic and Visual Tools

Teachers are finding success taking lessons beyond the core written words by using an expanding menu of educational tools to build both visualization of written meaning and creation of written materials that incorporate imagery. Students increasingly should be asked to consider the visual aspects of digital content — the illustrations, the arrangement of text on a page and the hyperlinks imbedded in the text. By necessity, they should learn to visualize images as they read and create their own writing using the full spectrum of linguistic and visual tools.

In addition, when students have the chance to write about or discuss their own works of art with others, they not only should be asked to clarify their thoughts and feelings through the spoken and written word about the art, but also to validate their perceptions about it. Furthermore, the writing and the discussion of a child's art can provide a path for the teacher to gain insight into a student's vision and life aspirations in a natural flow without undo probing.

Teachers and students should study the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.)

Impact on Teaching

According to the NCTE (2005), there are key concepts (declarations) of literacy that have profound impact on teaching. To begin, integration of multiple modes of communication and expression can enhance or transform the meaning of the work beyond the simple functions of illustration or decoration. “Multiple ways of knowing” (Short & Harste, 1996) include art, music, movement, and drama, which should not be considered curricular luxuries. Not surprisingly, it is also suggested (Short & Harste, 1996) that teachers and students should study the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.).

In this context, it is important to remember that all modes of communication depend on one another. “Each affects the nature of the content of the other and the overall rhetorical impact of the communication event itself.” (NCTE, 2007) Thus, young children engage in multimodal literacy naturally with spontaneity. They intuitively move among the modes of drama, art, text, music, speech, sound, and physical movement.

Many children grow up in economically and literarily impoverished and repressed environments and may not have the opportunities to experience and develop important early literacy foundations. Furthermore, “the over-emphasis on testing and teaching to the test may deprive many students of the kinds of diverse literacy experiences they most need.” (NCTE, 2007)

Engaging in classroom strategies to help students achieve literacy is critical. “The use of different types of expression in student work should be integrated into the overall literacy goals of the curriculum.” (NCTE, 2007) Students need to develop the abilities to both read critically and write functionally, no matter what the mode. In personal, civic, and professional discourse, combined alphabetic, visual, and aural literacy is not a luxury but essential components of knowing for the literate person. It is the responsibility of our schools to provide students with the access to this essential component of learning for the future success.

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