Supporting Literacy Through the Visual and Communicative Arts: Building Momentum in Literacy for 21st Century Digital Learners

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Abstract

Learners in the 21st century rely on images and social media to help them understand and make sense of their world. This article explores the powerful potential of using images and collaborative communication as a cognitive and aesthetic approach for enhancing literacy skills. In consideration of the new proposed resolution from the International Reading Association which affirms the importance of the fine arts as other ways of knowing, developing, and retaining knowledge, we as literacy educators should also expand classroom practice to include the visual and communicative arts as a means of creating meaningful literacy experiences across the curriculum that relate to the image based, everyday life literacy of 21st century leaners.

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Visual images and social media are part of the everyday language and learning medium of our 21st century students. Using media ranging from text messages to email to video diaries on Facebook to using the World Wide Web as their textbook, students communicate and share knowledge through images, symbols, music, video, and interactive interpretation. We live in the most exciting and academically stimulating of times, yet our traditional classrooms often stifle students' motivation to read and learn in an effort to hold on to what it is often considered the lost art of reading. However, the arts have the potential to make reading come alive for students who have been enculturated in a global society that learns through the universal language of images and icons.

In *The Miracle Worker*, language became an appreciated life-giving tool as we listened to the desperate wishes of Anne Sullivan who struggled to give Helen Keller, "One word, and I can put the world in your hands" (Gipson, 1957). However, that one word which eventually opened up the world for Helen came only as the result of shared experience and imagery. Students experience such transformations when reading is initiated with relevant visual images followed by shared thinking and interpreting through social interaction.

Today's learners are described by Prensky (2001) as digital natives who process information differently and have new thinking patterns. Using an arts-based literacy curriculum that integrates multiple ways of knowing helps students develop creative thinking skills and nourishes the imagination. Enhancing literacy lessons with the visual and communicative arts provides a repertoire of scripts necessary for visualizing and negotiating meaning (Park, 2012) in a classroom of 21st century learners whose everyday literacy is collaborative and image-based.

The Relationship between Literacy and the Arts

Reading is the process of forming a perception based on the imagery, form, and language of the text, translated through the experience of the reader (Cramer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2007). However, we read much more than just traditional printed text. We also read images. Multimedia learning, which consists of both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communicating ideas and information, is also referred to as a semiotic approach to learning. This use of messages and images of pop culture makes literacy a more complex process of reading different forms of text including visual images, mental images produced through enacting text, and other forms of representing meaning in multiple sign systems (Albers & Murphy, 2000; Cowan & Albers, 2006).

Harry Broudy (1987) suggested that the ability to decode the elements of an image is central to the capacity to think. Broudy claimed that from a phenomenological epistemology, the capacity to generate, analyze, and synthesize concepts requires cultivation of the imagination as an instrument for learning. An aesthetic view of literacy portrays reading as the imagined text, the construction and

interpretation of visual images using the process of inquiry. In an aesthetic sense, the reader has the capacity to experience meaning through the imagery of the mind.

Perhaps the best explanation of the educationally beneficial relationship between literacy and the arts comes from Perkins (1994) who explored works of arts as a means of learning to think by looking at art. He explained how the visual arts support the development of habits of mind through a sensory or aesthetic connection because "works of art call forth our personal involvement …Looking at art requires us draw on various types of cognition and encourages us to make connections with other domains of human experience" (p. ix).

In *Vygotskian Perspectives on Literary Research: Constructing Meaning Through Collaborative Inquiry*, John-Steiner and Meehan (2000) pointed out that Vygotsky provides a framework for understanding socially mediated creativity and learning which takes place through a performance and inquiry based classroom. Social interaction and role play are linked with cognitive and literacy development. As students use language, images, and modern technologies to negotiate meaning, their learning also resembles imaginative play that requires taking on a role in the thinking process. The arts can provide the medium for social construction of meaning.

There is much support from educational researchers in support of the arts as a catalyst for thinking and learning. In *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind*, Eisner (2002) validated the arts in education as a means of enhancing imagination and creative thought: "We do indeed see in our mind's eye" (p. 4). In further support of creativity and the communication skills necessary for learning and working, Eisner claims that the arts help us create our lives by "expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture" (p. 4). Jensen (2001) also reminded us that it is not that we cannot learn without the arts, but that "the arts enhance the process of learning by nourishing the sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capabilities systems connected to learning" (p. 2).

Sweet (1997) offered "justification for an expanded view of the definition of literacy" (p. 264) as a possible niche for the visual and communication arts. Included in the 1997 edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy through the Communicative and Visual Arts*, his article recognized that the definition of reading as the construction of meaning is confining. Sweet (1997) pointed out the possible handicapping effect that a narrow definition of literacy can have on children with varying aptitudes. The article claimed that broadening the definition of literacy to include the representation of visual and communication arts can make school relevant across cultures and various backgrounds.

Evidence of Success in Schools

Although research in learning through the arts is now more widely acknowledged, it is not celebrated or promoted in schools where testing results mandate the education curriculum. On July 27, 2007 the *New York Times* released a story about a ground breaking study on the effects of learning through the arts designed and implemented by the Guggenheim Museum Teaching Literacy Through Art program (Korn, 2007). The study was conducted in partnership with Randi Korn and Associates from 2003 -2006 and indicated that students became better learners and developed more effective thinking skills when they learned to describe, interpret, and write about art. The Guggenheim Museum study revealed a correlation between art education, social learning, and increased literacy. Over 500 students in four New York schools participated in the museum's program, and results also indicated a strong correlation with improved critical thinking and literacy skills.

Another rigorous research success story can be found at the Boulder Community School of Integrated Studies in Colorado. In collaboration with the community, this school created an education program using the arts to enhance intellectual development and increase scores in reading comprehension. The results, which were based on the Colorado state student assessment program, indicated that learning through the arts curriculum helped students develop thinking skills that transferred to success on standardized testing scores (Mantione & Smead, 2003).

The Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning (Fiske, 1999) is a compilation of research that involved seven major studies including research teams led by Shirley Brice Heath of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching , Steve Seidel with Harvard University's Project Zero, and James Catterall with the Imagination Project at the University of California . Catterall worked with over 25,000 students to provide evidence of how learning is enhanced through involvement in the arts. His study specifically referred to the potential of the arts to offer different ways of thinking and representing knowledge (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 2000).

Beth Olshansky's (2008) art-based literacy models have been proven to increase literacy achievement and standardized test scores especially for at risk readers. She has taught many educators to discover the power of pictures to stimulate the imagination and provide students who struggle with verbal skills and a new language with which to communicate and share ideas. Her longitudinal studies with over 12,000 students in New Hampshire indicated that "the language of pictures and the language of words are equal languages for learning" (p. 11).

Best Practices: Implementing Arts-Based Strategies in the Literacy Classroom

The social media generation has led me to consider a new acronym for digital readers struggling to read traditional texts. Now we have students who are WSL: Words as a Second Language. For today's digital visual learners, words are not their first language. They have grown up communicating through text, images, and music enhanced story telling through videos. Why not initiate a literacy experience with an image and build the vocabulary to share the image?

As students then think through, share, and discuss their interpretations of an image, they adopt a discourse of literacy (Gee, 1996) for communicating "in role" as an artist or historian or mathematician or scientist uses a common language and a disposition for thinking, creating, evaluating, and interpreting. Introducing new texts and concepts with visual images followed by a negotiation of meaning through discussion leads to a stronger personal connection to the learning experience (Roswell, McLean, & Hamilton, 2012).

Proposed benefits of incorporating the visual and communicative arts include the following:

1. Incorporating the arts in literacy education elevates art in education from a past time or interest to a meaningful method of learning and provides multiple ways of knowing and understanding across the various disciplines.

2. The arts can teach us to think by using multiple literacies to express ourselves and communicate with others in a meaningful way through a common language - the image, especially for today's visual learners.

3. The arts provide a means for multiple cultures to find common ground for understanding one another and our world. After all, symbols and images are the universal language.

4. The arts allow us to appreciate and come to see the perspectives of others through a safe medium where there are always many ways to interpret, and we "see" through the lens of our experiences.

5. The arts provide an aesthetic environment of learning, and seeing, and creating where our emotions and intuitions and feelings matter which allows us to learn with our whole being through our bodies, our voices, our minds, and our imagination.

(Based in part on the introduction of the *National Visual Arts Standards* (National Art Education Association, 2008)

In order to reap such potential benefits from the arts, literacy educators must create a learning environment conducive to interactive meaning construction that makes thinking visible. Rather than viewing thinking as a set of skills, thinking must be developed as a disposition which defines the character of the student as learner, reader, and scholar. Thinking involves a variety of cognitive acts such as questioning an assumption, developing a perspective, casting doubt, seeing something through the eyes of another, reflection, wondering, inquiring, creating, and visualizing. Students must first be immersed in a classroom learning environment that increases their sensitivity to critical/creative thinking processes and when and where they might apply, followed by an inclination to use such processes to solve a problem or

deepen understanding which will result in the skill and capability to utilize such processes proficiently (Ritchhart, 2002).

The arts can set the stage for developing thinking dispositions for 21st century learners by providing a canvas of thinking routines that teach students to think through the use of visuals and multiple forms of conveying meaning. Suggestions for using the arts include playing music (movie sound tracks work well) and asking students to write what they hear, or displaying an image and asking students to write what they see and explain their reasons. Using paintings and visual images can be used with a think aloud response which was created for one of my reading/writing through the arts classes. It is called the Four Ds of Determining Meaning. Students go through the thinking process of describing, discussing, and defending their perception of the image followed by a performance of understanding that involves directing the creation of text to tell the story of the image. The steps for the thinking routine appears in figures 1.

As students think aloud, mediate ideas and interpretations of images, share explanations, and perform their understandings, thinking becomes visible. For a term or concept to be meaningful, we must form a personal image or icon for that term. The senses, however, are constraining. We can view with only a single focus. Once the image is in the imagination, it can be recalled and imaginatively manipulated (Eisner, 1991). It is this ability to maneuver ideas/images that allows us to take on the perspective of others, to empathize (Greene, 1995). Through the use of the arts and thinking routines, we provide students an internship for developing mental imagery while they read which for most students has indeed become a lost art. Without imagery of text, there is no meaning - just decoding at best.

The Four Ds of Determining Meaning

Describe: First, students view and describe the image.

Discuss: The second step asks the students to discuss what they see with others to expand their vision and powers of observation.

Defend: The third step is to defend their claim based on what they see, feel, or know. One student defended his perception by noting the tiny village in the bottom of the picture where no one was seen outside and the dark and a fire surrounded their village. He described the setting as a tiny village in Vietnam where the people of the village prayed to a shiny star for peace. His story ended with the star granting peace and happiness, and the people became "amicable." The student came from Vietnam and was able to view the image through the lens of his own experience using a digital translator to add the word amicable.

Direct: The final step is to have students tell the story of the image in text by directing a performance of their understanding through a scripted narrative.

Figure 1. The Four Ds of Determining Meaning. This figure provides an example for the thinking routine. The image of *The Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art. This file has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights.

In the following classroom example, students read *The Incredible Painting of Felix Clousseau* written by J. Agee (1988). This charming story tells of a French painter who became famous for his paintings that came alive with eventual disastrous effects. To create a literacy experience, students were asked to choose an image of a famous painting (old calendars are a great source for images of artwork) and describe what they saw in nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Using creative and critical thinking, students then imagined what the result would be if their painting were to "come alive" followed by writing and illustrating these events. A Vietnamese student imagined that the small village at the bottom of Van Gough's Starry Night came alive, and the villagers prayed to the mighty stars above for peace.
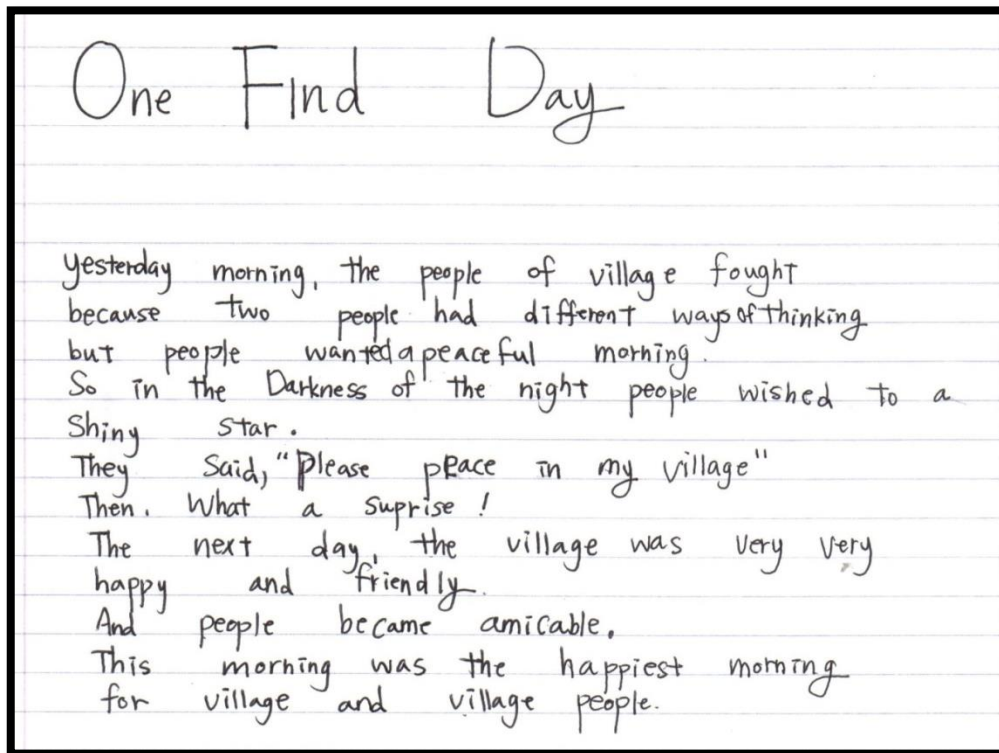

Figure 2. Student response. This figure provides an example of a student response to Van Gough's Starry, Starry Night.

Famous Painting Literacy Experience Form

Created by Dr. Neva Cramer , PRTE/IRA presentation (2013)

Directions:

1) **Work with a group of 2-3.**

2) **Examine your famous painting or illustration**

3) **Fill out the list of descriptive words. What do you see?**

Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs

4) **Create a story using your word list– Make your painting "come alive." Consider your story elements:**

    a. **Setting**

    b. **Characters**

    c. **Conflict**

    d. **Plot: Sequence of events**

5) **Sketch pad – draw a picture to go with your story**

Figure 3. Famous Painting Literacy Experience Form. This figure provides a form designed by the author.

Evidence of Transformation- My Own Classroom Experience

My struggling students were visual learners and by using the visual and communicative arts, I found a way to make words come alive for them where meaning could be transferred and constructed through the drama of the voice, the embedded story of an image, or the mental pictures evoked through music and sound. Using an arts-based literacy curriculum based in part on the work of Matione and Smead's *Weaving Through Words: Using the Arts to Teach Reading Comprehension Strategies* (2003), I developed a 12-week Learning through the Arts Program for struggling middle school readers. The program included literacy lessons initiated with visual images that incorporated various forms of social interaction to construct and share meaning. Assessment was performance based, and students were expected to perform their literacy understandings through visual art, music, or drama or a combination.

Students read a series of various genres ranging in level from early childhood picture books to challenging chapter books. New vocabulary was introduced through an initial exposure to the words using visual images or videos. Students kept evolving journals that visually represented their comprehension journey through collage, word poems, storyboards, and scripts. They often used partner reading and a reading strategy similar to GRASP (Guided Reading and Summarizing Procedure). After preparing students to read by frontloading with relevant visual images, students would read an assigned passage, write down what they remembered, talk through their reading, reread and edit lists of remembered ideas, facts, or scenarios, and finally summarize by visually representing the reading.

As a pre and post illustration of attitudes toward reading, I asked students to draw a picture of themselves reading and title it. The following illustrations provide a student sample of student illustrations before and after going through the 12-week reading program. This type of transformation in attitude occurred in about 90% of those students who begin with a negative attitude toward reading.
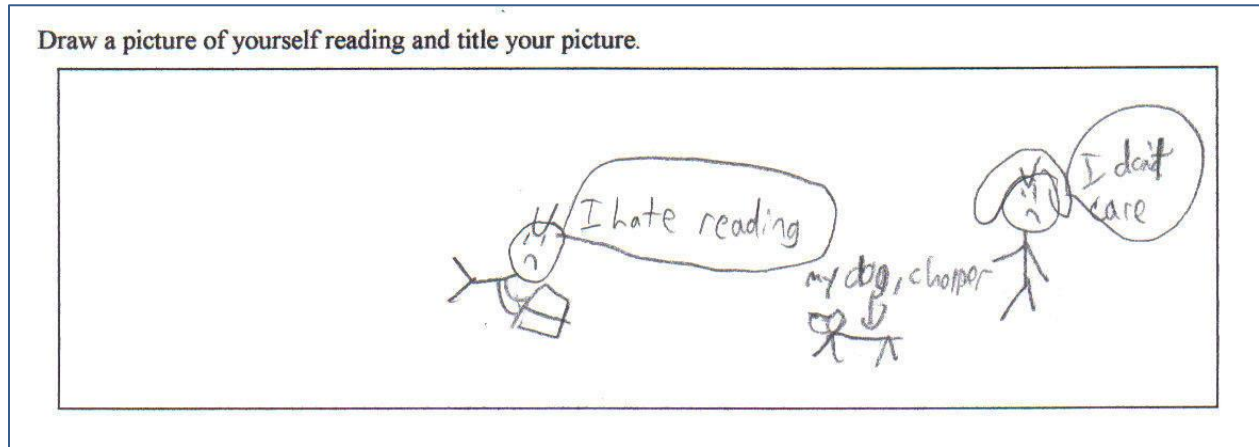
Figure 4. Student Response to the Famous Painting Literacy Experience Form. This figure provides an example of a student response before the reading program.
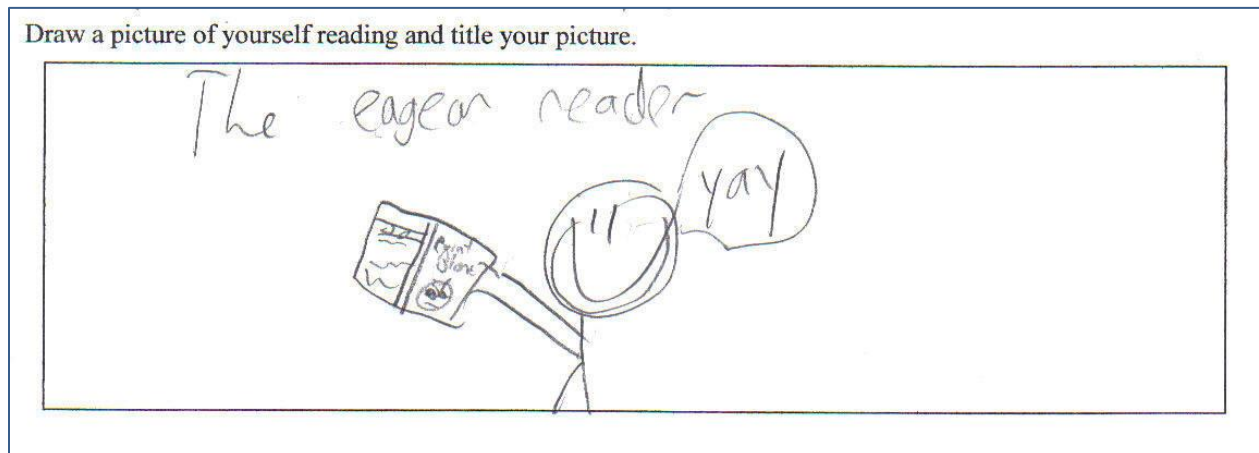

Figure 5. Student Response to the Famous Painting Literacy Experience Form. This figure provides an example of what the same student drew after the program.

Conclusion

The arts can set the stage for developing the thinking dispositions and the language potential of visual leaners who struggle to transfer the construction of meaning from their visual and social media world to the seemingly less relevant world of classroom text. In my own experiences of tutoring very learning disabled students, I found that their vision was very limited. Their mental imagery was sparse and unconnected rather than creative and contiguous. This same disability can be environmentally induced through neglect or abuse of students' natural creativity for the sake of educational directives and

outdated teaching methods. Using the arts to help educate students for the 21st century turns our literacy classrooms into a culture of inquiry that reflects critical /creative thinking in an effort to make educational standards meaningfully prepare our students to be lifelong learners. Promoting and teaching reading as a multisensory experience through the arts makes literacy a learning experience that struggling readers might otherwise have neglected, ignored, or been deprived of within the limits of life's opportunities.

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HELPFUL WEBSITES
Art Educators http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/10-lessons-the-arts-teach
The Kennedy Center for the Arts http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators.aspx
Project Zero http://www.pz.harvard.edu/
Artful Thinking   http://www.pzartfulthinking.org/index.php
The 21st Century Skills Maps http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/P21_arts_map_final.pdf
Arts Integration Solutions: http://artsintegration.com/
Arts and the Common Core Curriculum Mapping Project http://commoncore.org/maps/documents/Art_in_the_Maps.pdf
Creativity and the New Common Core Standards http://edu.moca.org/education/teachers/commoncore
Harvard's Project Zero- Visible Thinking Routines http://www.pz.harvard.edu/
The Kennedy Center ArtsEdge website http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/standards.aspx
The Chicago Teachers' Center (CTC). *Every art, every child: A curriculum in, about, and through the arts:* http://everyarteverychild.org/

Figure 6. Helpful Websites. This figure presents a list of helpful websites generated by the author.