Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of visual literacy and the problems inherent in regarding images as ‘texts’. In large part contemporary understanding of visual literacy has emerged through the work of Kress (2003) and van Leeuwen (2006). These theorists have helped form a system of visual grammar and syntax that can be used to decipher meaning in imagery. While this creates further insight into the ways in which visual communication works, it rarely reveals ‘the whole picture’. In this paper it is suggested that a dichotomy exists between a systemic functional approach to reading images as ‘text’ in English education and what could be described as an aesthetic approach in art education.

Introduction

Traditionally, academic education has given priority to ideas that can be expressed in words and numbers (Robinson, 2001). The fact that visual communication has been given a higher profile in education in recent times can partly be attributed to recent cognitive research directed toward understanding processes of image perception and retention. The use of visual media in learning and teaching is supported by research demonstrating that learner preferences and styles might be more effectively addressed (Gardner, 1993) and that enhanced learning and retention can take place through the use of visual material (Dwyer & Baker, 2001; Carney & Levin, 2002). Unsworth (2008:4) also points out that it has become apparent to many educational researchers, that ‘the increasingly multimodal nature of our textual habitat has made it necessary to reconceptualize the nature of literacy and literacy pedagogy.’ The increasingly multimedia nature of the world makes it hard to make a distinction between words and pictures in terms of how they contribute to comprehension and understanding of meaning (Dresang cited in Unsworth, 2008:4).

The rise in computer and multi-media, particularly interactive technologies in teaching, places a higher reliance on visual information processing. Novice learners, particularly those who lack visual literacy skills, find it extremely difficult to identify features and interpret meaning in visual communication (Geake and Porter, 1999). According to Schnotz (2002), visual semantic processing is required in order for viewers to comprehend a picture as opposed to their merely perceiving it. Visual semantic processing occurs in thought rather than the eye, such that fundamental visual forms are given meaning through association with previous knowledge. What we ‘see’ is to a large degree, determined by our knowledge of what we ‘should see’ (Solso, 1996:75). In this respect recognising contextual elements plays a large part in the comprehension of signs, symbols and objects. Training
in visual perception and semantic processing from an early age should offer individuals the opportunity to become better 'visual thinkers' (Ritchhart, Palmer, Church, & Tishman, 2006). Without expert guidance it is unlikely that people will develop a deeper understanding of their visual experiences and be able to communicate effectively through the visual arts.

A broad view of visual literacy

Visual literacy describes an individual's ability to 'read', interpret and make meaning from images. It is not confined to mass media and technology but incorporates any kind of communication that uses visual signs and symbols. Those who are visually literate can see beyond the surface of images and designed objects. They can look critically and develop a deeper understanding of how images and objects shape their own beliefs and identity, as well as the meanings have in culture and society (Freedman, 2003). A visually literate person should not only be a critical interpreter but also able to create visual images and objects of their own. Yenawine (1997:845) describes visual literacy as, …the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification (naming what one sees) to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. Objective understanding is the premise of much of this literacy, but subjective and affective aspects of knowing are equally important.

This definition is valuable in that it emphasises the varying level of processing that occurs when different individuals are presented with visual imagery. A higher level of cognitive processing and affective response is demonstrated when individuals are able to appreciate contextual, metaphorical and philosophical meanings (Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002).

Images as ‘texts’

Visual literacy is based on the idea that images can be ‘read’ and that meaning can be communicated through a process of ‘reading’ because both forms involve the use of language to make meaning. But are the skills and understandings relevant to the study of written and visual language the same? Unfortunately, conceiving of images as ‘texts’ undermines the extraordinary differences that exist between visual and written language (Arnheim, 1969). Despite finding commonalities, it should be acknowledged that they cannot be read in exactly the same way.

The use of the word ‘reading’ when discussing a ‘visual text’ implies that a form of deconstruction occurs during viewing. However, visual communication does not have any particular starting and end point and employs more abstract or ill-defined symbols to represent meaning. Alternatively, there are generally rules that are universally accepted and applied in written language. Robinson (2001) argues that it is difficult to equate art with written language because the former is a schematic and the
later is essentially a systematic form of communication. Artworks are schematic because they show a conceptual arrangement or layout of parts in complex two, three, or four, dimensional forms all at once. Written language takes many forms but largely it is systematic in that it is carried out in a methodical and organised manner and habitually presents established patterns of lexical meaning and grammatical phrasing.

Visual communication comes in many forms and the varying nature of visual schema makes it more difficult to apply the same method of interpretation. Artworks contain diverse forms and symbols that are often unique to the artist and open to different interpretations amongst viewers. All art to some degree is abstract and the abstract nature of art adds a higher degree of complexity in regards to teaching visual literacy. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:170) have developed the coding orientations 'naturalistic' and 'abstract' in relation to images and acknowledge that abstraction represents far greater complexity:

the ability to produce and/or read texts grounded in this coding orientation is a mark of social distinction, of being an 'educated person' or a 'serious artist'.

**English and Visual Arts School Curriculum: Variations in conceptualization**

Scholars, such as, Kress (2003) have advocated for a more multimodal approach to reading texts pointing to the interacting and interlacing of visual and linguistic literacies in the meaning making process. Teaching students to interpret visual text in the English primary and secondary school curriculums similarly underscores the linguistic structures and features that are common to both written and visual texts. For example, they both are considered to present such things as a narrative or point of view, a plot and sub-plots, stereotypes, social settings and cultural contexts, as well as codings (symbolic, technical, etc).

In all Australian states the primary and secondary English curriculum incorporates the study of visual literacy and aspects of visual grammar. The rationale for this inclusion is that, like written texts, images involve the use of language to make meaning (Callow, 1999). *Viewing and Creating* forms a single strand of the New South Wales English Year 7 to 10 syllabus profile and includes the use of both written and visual texts (NSW Board of Studies, 2003). Students learn about visual grammar, which underscores the structures of visual design. This grammar incorporates concepts like tone, tenor, field, mode, perspective, vectors and frames. These are related to picture books and other print media, or films. While many of these concepts are also introduced in visual arts education (e.g. form and composition = visual mode) the focus in art appreciation, criticism and historical studies is upon aesthetics as well as the personal, social and cultural agencies that impact upon artistic practice.
In Australia, most school graduates have no formal education in the visual arts beyond early adolescence, a time when students are able to make the transition from mandatory to elective courses. To some extent this gap in visual literacy education is offset by the inclusion of a visual communication focus in subjects such as English, which remain mandatory throughout secondary schooling. However, a lack in opportunities to develop visual literacy skills in secondary schooling clearly has implications in regards to the extent that adult learners are able to move from more generalised perceptions to close observations of visual qualities.

Art education has a distinctive role to play in building visual literacy skills because artworks are excellent vehicles for developing visual competencies. They involve visual narratives—stories that often address universal human concerns and conditions, they are intentionally ambiguous because they are open to a variety of interpretations, they can trigger emotional responses due to their expressive content and they contain layers of meaning, symbols and metaphor. Artists often create contradictions and through the power of their imagination are able to transform the commonplace into new and unusual structures. Often unlocking meaning in art can involve applying strategies to decipher images. We look for image titles or other text accompanying the image to establish expectations, scan the image for information, identify the visual and design elements presented, and try and identify the artist’s purpose. These procedures usually require individuals to draw on their prior knowledge of a topic or events. Furthermore, artworks represent an aesthetic and this presents a further layer of understanding for the responder beyond the scope of literal deduction and analysis.

**Aesthetic response and critical analysis**

While teachers can provide a cultural matrix through which visual literacy skills are developed there is an aspect of visual response and understanding that is hard to teach or learn. One’s aesthetic response cannot directly be formed through literal deduction and analysis of independent parts within a picture frame (Abbs, 1993: 10-11; Robinson, 2001:124). To reduce artistic endeavours to such a functional role is to deny the unique engagement of the senses and imagination that artworks can evoke. An aesthetic judgement about value in art requires critical reflection and this reflection engages the senses and emotions as well as the intellect.

Abbs (1993:11) comments that in recent decades a philosophical shift to critical theory has consigned the primacy of the aesthetic experience to ‘the dustbin of bourgeois history’. Aesthetics has a long history as a branch of philosophy but the term ‘aesthetic’ has commonly been associated with the discourse of ‘taste’ and ‘beauty’. This presents a superficial and somewhat frivolous social function for the role of the aesthetic, however, in Arts education the aesthetic experience is generally described as a way of responding to the world that operates through the senses and highlights the role of feelings in understanding (Abbs, 1993:4, Sinclair, 2009:43). Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Sinclair,
2009:13) describes the aesthetic experience as, '…a state of mind where experiences are more clear and focused than everyday life'.

An aesthetic approach to interpretation of artworks allows for a greater focus on the metaphoric and sensuous meaning of art and the development of the individual’s ability to engage in interpretive discourse within the broader arts field. The affective dimension of meta-interpretation means that interrelations are established between the responder and a work of art such that they are 'felt', and not just 'noticed', or 'read'. Therefore, emotions are deemed to be as important in gaining understanding or meaning as apprehending the content of a work of art.

The study of visual culture and communication

Postmodernist trends in art education have in recent years shifted the focus away from the fine arts. Many art educators are now using the term 'visual culture', rather than 'Art', to describe their central concern in teaching critical and historical studies in art education (Duncum, 2001). The use of the term ‘visual culture’ points to the intersection of the fine arts and popular arts. In this respect the study of visual culture in art education represents a change in emphasis from what is considered a more elitist view of Art. Freedman (2003:1) says visual culture, ‘includes the fine arts, tribal arts, advertising, popular film and video, folk art, television and other performance, housing and apparel design, computer game and toy design’.

The study of visual culture is redefining the field of art education because there are major implications for visual arts teaching when we no longer look at an object as art but rather the product of one’s visual culture. The difference in philosophy blurs the boundaries between fine art and the rest of visual culture and this broadens the scope of investigation. It is claimed that visual culture pedagogy requires a more trans-disciplinary focus that crosses traditional curriculum boundaries (Freedman, 2003). Greater overlaps in curriculum content and enquiry raises the spectre of opposing ideologies and methodologies in regards teaching visual literacy.

Summary

The explosion in the use of visual media and technologies in our times has meant there is a greater need for training visually literate individuals. This is appropriate for a time in which there is nearly instant transmission of visual images and messages to broader audiences that include different social and cultural groups. This paper set out to highlight the value of including visual communication in multimodal approaches to learning, as well as to point out the differences that exist between the way students learn visual literacy skills through English and the visual arts curriculum. It is argued that problems arise when forms of visual communication, including visual arts, are perceived as 'texts'. 
This over-simplification undermines the unique meta-phenomena of visual communication and response.

The discussion has highlighted the dichotomy that has existed between the more functional approach to teaching visual literacy in school English education and what is described as either an 'aesthetic' or 'artistic' approach in Visual Arts education. In a functional approach, students learn to critically decode and encode visual imagery. By contrast, in an artistic approach, students develop skills as both critical and aesthetic responders to art and other forms of visual communication. Importantly through creative practice they also are given opportunities to become effective visual communicators.

Theories of visual culture have been presented in this paper in order to show that there has been an evolution in thinking about the study of visual arts in educational contexts. This evolution may mean radical change is required in the way that educators approach teaching visual literacy requiring them to broaden the scope of their enquiry. The introduction of visual culture pedagogy is also bound to produce a greater overlap in curriculum territory blurring the boundaries between subject areas. Such a trajectory may demand a more coherent approach that bridges the divide between ideological differences and methodologies as well as research and teaching in the fields of English/Literacy and the visual arts. Greater levels of research, leadership and advocacy in visual arts education would serve to maintain the stronghold of knowledge and expertise developed over many decades of teaching students about visual communication. The pressure to conform to popular functional linguistic approaches to the study of 'visual text' into the future is a definite reality in the domain of school education.
References


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