The notion of visual literacy—comprehending meaning through a variety of visual clues and constructing symbolic communication through text, graphics, animation, and other means—has taken on added importance in the last two decades. During this period, technology has changed the dominant communication media to which all of us are exposed. Despite the inevitability of this new literacy, many educators have been slow to accept its importance, a circumstance that is inconsistent with the lessons of the past.

Throughout history, the definition of literacy has changed to reflect the then current technology. Early humans would have been considered literate if they could understand the rudimentary spoken language or gestures of their peers. The definition of literacy broadened as humans began to use visual symbols to communicate, from cave paintings and petroglyphs through formal phonetic, ideographic, and alphabetic writing. In short, the definition of literacy expands to reflect the various media to which humans are exposed.

The broadening of the historic definition of literacy was typically accompanied by a concomitant valuing of the new media to which literacy was related. This was especially true with the invention of writing and reading, which for centuries were associated almost exclusively with wealth, privilege, achievement, and religious stature. Surprisingly, this trend toward valuation of “new” literacy has been interrupted in recent decades, with visual or information literacy being perceived as less worthwhile than the “old” literacies of reading and writing.

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The tendency to devalue visual or information literacy is understandable for a number of reasons. Reading and writing have a long and admirable history, they are ideal media for transmitting a wide variety of information, and they require a level of intellectual commitment that newer media seem to lack. In addition, newer media—television, computers, hand-held electronic devices, and even everyday signage—seem somewhat shallow and effortless when compared with reading and writing. To paraphrase a noted purveyor of the old media, there seems to be no “there there” when it comes to visual literacy.

A growing number of educators, however, have recognized the importance of visual literacy and have developed a variety of techniques to promote this ability among their students. These teachers understand that success in the coming years will depend not only on traditional reading and writing, but students’ ability to create and comprehend visual media of all kinds. They believe, and rightly so, that learners should use all information that is available to construct meaning, and that using graphic displays isn't cheating or preventing students from using letters and word knowledge. Rather, graphic displays augment text, and well-designed forms of visual communication are as important as those that involve only text.

**Teaching Visual Literacy**

The first step to encouraging visual literacy is *exposing students to a broad range of appropriate visual media*. This can be accomplished by directing students to well-designed Internet sites, creating displays of visual information such as collections of print advertising or graphic displays that accompany magazine stories, showing video clips of television shows, or presenting students with other visual displays such as logos or even
road signs. Once students understand the diversity of visual media, they can be encouraged to gather examples on their own from the Internet, television, print advertisements, local signage, and cultural displays. The latter is an often-overlooked source of visual communication and includes posters and signage for museums, plays, music events, dance, and other instances of the creative and performing arts.

The next step is exceptionally important. It involves an interactive discussion of the characteristics of the visual media the teachers and students have collected. The discussion, which is typically moderated by the teacher, gives students a chance to reflect on how the different aspects of the visual media communicate the intended ideas. It is often the case that the teacher will lead the discussion at first to point out characteristics with which students may be unfamiliar, such as type size and style, the use of icons, the relationship between graphics and captions, and the subtleties of presentation. In a relatively short time, however, students will probably take a more active role in the discussion, allowing the teacher to function more as a facilitator than as a leader.

The third step is a preparatory stage in which students plan their own visual displays. Given the availability and attractiveness of technology, students will be inclined to create their own web pages or computer presentations. This tendency should certainly be encouraged, but students should also be urged to create non-electronic displays. This practice will stretch technology resources by having students work off-line, show students that technology is not the only source of visual communication, foster various forms of creativity, and help students understand the relationship among print, graphics, animation, and technology.
The fourth stage is having students *create the visual displays they planned previously*. As you might expect, students throw themselves into the implementation stage with great enthusiasm. Again, this enthusiasm should be encouraged, but so too should “formative evaluation,” the process by which students examine their progress in the light of the planning stage and the outcomes they anticipated.

Because students are creating a variety of visual displays, they should have access to a continuum of tools, from traditional art media to grade-appropriate software. Fortunately, virtually all “communication” programs today—word processors, paint and draw programs, page layout programs, and presentation programs—have the capability to create traditional and web-enabled displays. In addition, there are a variety of web page development programs and online tool suites offered by some service providers. Given this range of options, teachers should have no problem matching students with the right tools.

*Having students engage in peer review* is the final stage of the process. In some respects, this stage is a reapplication of the skills students learned in stage two, during which they reviewed examples of visual communication. The chief difference now is that the students themselves are the creators as well as the reviewers. This, of course, adds the dimension of self-perception to the process, so it is essential that students learn to give and accept well-intentioned criticism.

By separating the planning and implementation stages, teachers can show students that the stages of the writing process, with which they are probably familiar, can be applied to the creation of visual media. Even though students may have done a thorough job during the preparatory stage, they will discover that their plans often have to be changed as they implement them. Some students might find this frustrating or even
discouraging, so it will be important to provide them with the adult or peer support they need to complete the project while incorporating the changes needed to create a meaningful visual display.

**Additional Considerations**

Two additional considerations are worth keeping in mind. One is that activities that promote visual literacy should be provided to all students, not just those who are doing above-average work. Anecdotal reports suggest that not only are the full range of students interested in visual literacy, but also that many so-called at-risk students can be motivated to succeed through visual literacy activities. A surprising number of under-achieving students who struggle with traditional print literacy find they are better at creating and understanding visual displays. Moreover, the success they achieve with visually oriented communication can be a steppingstone to improved performance in both reading and writing.

A second consideration is that visual literacy should become an ongoing part of the curriculum. Like traditional literacy, it should be integrated into instructional activities whenever possible. This integration can take the form of a series of ongoing questions that reflect current events or instructional topics such as:

- What are some examples of good and poor signage on local roads and highways?
- How do politicians attempt to attract voters during political campaigns with brief television advertisements?
- How do weather reporters communicate large amounts of detailed information quickly?
• How do various web sites compare with respect to understandability, depth
  or breadth of information, and ease of navigation?
• Why do some corporate logos and names become widely known while
  others do not?
• How have visual artists changed the way they communicate across the
  ages?
• How have different cultural groups used visual communication across the
  ages?
• What are the similarities and differences between visual communication
  among young people and adults?
• How have magazines and newspapers over the past decades changed the
  way they communicate visually?
• What are some differences among web sites that are intended for different
  audiences?

As you can see, there are endless questions dealing with visual literacy, both
expressive and receptive. These questions can serve as the catalyst to promote student
learning of this important skill and can demonstrate that visual literacy, when addressed
with the same rigor as traditional print literacy, is a meaningful subject worthy of being
included in the curriculum.

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