



Visual Literacy:

The Power of Images for Learning



By Lynell Burmark,
Ph.D.

The signs are everywhere—for those who can read them. The primary literacy of the 21st century will be visual: pictures, graphics, and images of every kind. Engineering, architecture, computer trades, health care professions, even jobs as pedestrian as cooking fries at McDonald’s (now done with sophisticated robotics) all require visual literacy. It’s no longer enough to read and write text. Our students must learn to process both words and pictures. They must be able to move gracefully and fluently between text and images, between literal and figurative worlds.

Not only does visual literacy improve students’ options in the work world, but more immediately, from the educator’s perspective, it also enhances and accelerates learning in K-12 classrooms. From print materials to computer-based presentations and the myriad of graphical sites on the Internet, image-rich curriculum reaches and teaches more students more quickly and more meaningfully than traditional written student reports and text-based, talking-teacher instruction ever could.

Good teachers have always known that visual images help learners understand and remember complex information and abstract concepts. In 400 B.C.E., in the *Phaedo*, Plato recounts Socrates describing two worlds: the murky, tangled world of speech versus the perfect, well-lit world of imagery. In 1658, pansophist philosopher John Amos Comenius published *The Visible World*, considered to be one of the first illustrated books for children. Both Freud and Piaget recognized that young children handle concrete images more easily than abstract words.

In a 1982 study, Levie and Lentz reported findings from 55 experiments comparing learning from illustrated text versus text alone. They noted that illustrations contributed to reader interest and enjoyment, affected attitudes and emotions, and provided spatial information that was difficult to express in words. They also calculated that groups using illustrated texts performed 36 percent better than groups using text alone on measured criteria.¹

In his landmark publication, *Multimedia Learning*, University of California, Santa Barbara Professor Richard Mayer shares the results of his research: retention and recall are boosted 42 percent and transfer a whopping 89 percent with illustrated texts!²

Whatever the subject area, teachers must anchor information to an image or a series of images. Is it time for religious studies, character education, or a few quiet moments of introspection? Help yourself to the “Beginnings and Endings” section of the NOAA Web site at www.noaa.com with its breathtaking sunrises, sunsets, moonbeams and moonlight.

Little Eugene must have been looking at a similar image when he wrote the following letter:

*Dear God,
I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool.*

– Eugene

“I didn’t think . . . until I saw.”

Eugene takes us to the heart of visual literacy. It’s not



just looking at pretty pictures. It's understanding how we think—how we connect what we already know about the world, life, relationships and values to those pictures—and then use them to make sense of our expanded world.

When we experience visions, daydreams, nightmares, spiritual revelations, poignant memories, “Aha!” moments, or even delightful flights of imagination, they tend to come to us in images rather than words, most often as a kind of cinema that combines dialog and images into action sequences. As my colleague Lou Fournier Marzeles says, “Imagery is the language of the spirit,” by which he means that an image bypasses linguistic and rational hurdles and impacts us with meaning immediately and viscerally.

Pictures are like islands in the sun, the visible tips of remembered experiences and feelings that plunge far below the surface.

As with Rorschach tests, images all around us induce deeply personal perspectives and highly affective projections. Visual literacy is about understanding how and why such projections work and how we can affect our students and other audiences clearly, responsibly, and purposefully.

I like to think of “visual literacy” as 3-D eyeglasses for the mind. They are the lenses through which we see the meaning—the words and ideas—behind the images. When we teach our students to view images—everything from universal symbols like the stick figures on public rest room doors to artfully composed professional photographs—we are guiding them through a visual experience that takes us beyond the two dimensions of the medium itself.

Learning to articulate the real-life experiences behind photos we cherish, extracting the “storyboards” from plays, poems, and

novels, students can begin to read images and words with new eyes. They can embark on travel in both directions—from pictures to words and words to pictures—and be enriched by both the outbound and the return journey.

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¹Levie, W. H. and Lentz, R., “Effects of Text Illustrations: A Review of Research,” Educational Communication and Technology Journal, 30 (4), pp. 195-232.

² Mayer, Richard E., Multimedia Learning, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2001.



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