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Seeing the Value: Why the Visual Arts Have a Place in the English Language Arts Classroom

ROBERT M. JORDAN AND MICHAEL DICICCO

Now that we are well into the era of accountability, many previously valued areas of learning have been drastically cut to focus on the tested subjects of reading and math. Visual arts instruction is often one of the first areas to be eliminated, or at best, relegated to the role of a rewarded elective for those students whose tests scores are sufficiently high enough to afford this “non-academic” treat. Increasingly, English Language Arts (ELA) curricula are being narrowed to just reading and writing—what is tested is all that is taught. We see this narrowing of the curriculum as dangerously misguided, placing our students at a disadvantage by denying them the knowledge, skills, and varied instruction that would best position them for success in our increasingly multimodal world.

Traditional visual media such as photography, painting, and film are quite valuable in the acquisition of literacy skills. However, this requires the teacher to implement these media in a manner that Street (2005) emphasizes as “ways to rethink, redefine, and redesign language and literacy in the classroom to meet the contemporary needs and skills of students” (p. 421). Although the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) do not contain a specific visual communication thread, visual communication is embedded within the language arts and other subjects. For example, the Reading Literature anchor standard does urge that we, “Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (CCSS Standard 7, p. 35). As the CCSS becomes the new norm, we can take what we know about the value of visual arts integration in the language arts and reading classrooms and increase our students’ abilities, motivation, and performance by providing the balanced and thorough approach made possible by this added dimension.

Many teachers may be hesitant to integrate visual arts into their classrooms due to the pressures of high-stakes testing and scripted curricula, unfamiliarity with visual arts, or a

perceived lack of needed materials. The purpose of this article is to show how implementing visual arts in the language arts classroom can be beneficial for language arts teachers and their students. But because testing is so prevalent and often drives curricular decisions, we begin with what research says about the arts and testing. We then explain how incorporating visual arts can help motivate students, provide teachers with useful tools, and guide students to think critically and deeply. We conclude with other practical benefits to using visual arts. Finally, we provide an annotated list of sources that we have found useful in implementing visual arts in the language arts classroom.

Testing: Art and Academic Achievement

Research has shown that there are connections between the arts and academic achievement. For example, one study concluded, “the verbal and math SAT scores of students taking any form of art, irrespective of number of years, are significantly higher than for students who take no art” (Vaughn & Winner, 2000, p. 83). Other studies have found causal correlations between studying music and higher verbal scores on the SAT (Butzlaff, 2000). Low socioeconomic status (SES) students who took theater had gains on reading tests and also had a higher motivation to read (Caterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). Visual responses to art have been shown to increase reading comprehension scores on standardized tests (Wilhelm, 1995).

However, some researchers (i.e. Winner & Cooper, 2000; Winner & Hetland, 2000; Eisner, 1999) have expressed serious doubts about the strength of these connections. Just as reading instruction is not used primarily for writing tests, art is rarely, if ever, taught to bolster skills such as reading and math, the primary content in academic achievement tests. Arts instruction is delivered to improve artistic performance, just as reading instruction aims to improve reading skills. So while there is some research to show academic achievement

by students exposed to the arts, it is perhaps the wrong way to understand the importance of the arts in the language arts classroom.

One of the leading advocates of arts education, Elliot Eisner, cautions against looking for the arts/testing connection. Eisner (2002) warns that improving tests scores should not be the motivation behind arts education, but arts instruction should be administered to improve artistic skills. In fact, Davis (2008) contends that “the arts, like most really significant human behaviors, defy measurement” (2008, p. 80). Like Eisner, Miron (2003) points out researchers’ efforts are misguided in attempting to find the cognitive benefits of arts education. He believes that the research does show effective transfer of skills, but that it is erroneous to believe that “learning in the arts should be organized to achieve such transfer” instead of maintaining a “vision of arts education as a place for the vivid expression of humanistic values” (p. 30). While the benefits to test scores are yet to be definitively determined, we argue that there are many other benefits to visual art integration that can be seen.

These benefits arise when visual arts practices are not viewed as separate from, but integral to English language arts instruction. Research shows that using visual art instruction results in higher motivation and increased attendance (Catterall & Peppler, 2007), expanded spatial reasoning (Hetland, 2000), increased creativity (Moga, Burger, Hetland, & Winner, 2000), heightened ability to produce imagery (Gambrell & Koskinen, 2001), and improved communication skills (Podiozny, 2000). Incorporating visual art into the classroom can be beneficial for any subject, but as these studies show, especially for the language arts. What follows are three reasons why language arts teachers should incorporate visual art into their classrooms.

Reason One: The Visual Arts Motivate Students

Half the battle in any classroom is getting students engaged and motivated. A lesson in which students are not engaged or motivated is a lesson that is doomed to fail. Incorporating visual art has been shown to increase motivation and engagement in the classroom (Gambrell & Koskinen, 2001; Wilhelm, 2004) especially with students from low SES backgrounds (Catterall & Peppler, 2007; Catterall, Chapleau & Iwanaga, 1999). Incorporating visual images does something that isn’t done in many of their classes: it provides them with a medium of understanding in which they are the most fa-

miliar. Our students today are bombarded with visual images through billboards, TV advertisements, and flashing ads on the computer. Images are everywhere and our students are making sense of them. When students are plucked out of their natural visual habitats and thrown into a room full of print texts, it is not hard to see why they struggle. Providing visual images gives students the opportunity to learn in a medium more familiar to them or, if nothing else, it is something different that they may not be getting in their other classes. By simply incorporating visual images into lessons, motivation can be increased.

Increased student motivation not only means engaged students, but it can also improve attendance (Baker, Bronwyn & Admon, 2002) as well. Students are more interested in the content and, therefore, more willing to come to school. In one study (Catterall & Peppler, 2007), an arts unit was implemented two days a week in two low-income, inner-city schools. The researchers reported that these students maintained higher levels of focus in their non-arts classes, had more positive interactions with their peers and adults, and received more positive feedback from their teachers. In another study (President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2009), the principal of the school wanted the two days to be on Monday and Friday; the two days students were most often absent. Through the course of the study, student attendance increased. The results of the study show that student scores increased, but it cannot be determined if it was because of the art instruction or because students were in school more often. In either case, students benefitted from having the arts in their classroom.

Reason Two: The Visual Arts Give ELA Teachers New Tools

In addition to motivating students, bringing visual art into the classroom also provides a number of useful and effective tools for teachers. A teacher’s toolbox can never be too full—the more tools, the better. Bringing visual art into the ELA classroom provides teachers with a new set of tools and materials from which they can build any number of lessons. While the term “visual art” encompasses a large number of media, we give some examples of how simple prints or photographs can be used.

First and foremost, visuals can be a tool to help build background knowledge (Gambrell & Koskinen, 2001; Wilhelm, 2004). Students unfamiliar with a time period or a particular theme can gain valuable background knowledge

through visuals. Having this background knowledge aids in reading comprehension (Miller, Stine-Morrow, Kirkorian, & Conroy, 2004). Through this building and reinforcing of background knowledge, students build schema and are able to think about a text more deeply than without background knowledge (Bynres & Wasik, 2009). In short, this helps students “see” what is going on in the text (Wilhelm, 2004). For example, if a class were getting ready to read Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, photographs such as Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (Figure 1) could be shown and discussed in order to help students understand the Great Depression. For most students, images of poverty are formed by contemporary experience and images. While these images might be quite valid, they may not be sufficient for another context. The plight of the Joad family in Depression Era America might be quite difficult for current students to imagine, but the iconic images shot by Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographers can help create the background knowledge necessary for a fuller understanding of the text.

In addition to building background knowledge, visuals can be used to address literary themes. Literary themes such as beauty, perseverance, friendship, and man’s struggles against nature are frequently reflected in works of art. The nuances and subtleties of human emotions and interactions are often difficult for younger students to comprehend. Having students study a theme presented in a work of art may help them better understand a literary text. Building students’ knowledge of themes is essentially building student schemata for the text they are about to read or are currently reading. For students who struggle to relate to complex character interactions, artworks containing similar themes may serve as a scaffold to building background knowledge.

For example, students who have not experienced love and loss as portrayed in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* may benefit from exposure to these themes in the painting *The Death of*

Ophelia by Eugene Delacroix. In the painting, Delacroix attempts to portray the anguish experienced by Hamlet’s potential bride, which may reinforce the students’ understanding of the theme in the text. Additionally, students who are not familiar enough with Shakespearean language may find it

Figure 1. *Migrant Mother*, Dorothea Lange, 1936.

difficult to visualize Ophelia’s despair when she says:

And I, of ladies most dejected and wretched,
That suck’d honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;
(3.1.160-163)

However, integrating artworks such as Delacroix’s can help to form a bridge toward comprehension. The painting

captures these emotions in a way that most students can see and therefore understand. When Gertrude speaks of, “the pendent boughs her cornet weeds/Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke” (4.3.188-189), the painting again can serve to concretely illustrate the symbols hidden in the words. The unfamiliar and obscure in text can come alive in the minds of adolescents through the viewing of similar content in visual representations.

Beyond assisting with reading comprehension, visual art can also be used to teach writing. A carefully selected work of art can be examined for the many details contained within its composition. With guided practice, this attention to detail can then be transferred to writing composition by using the artwork as a model. The teacher emphasizes that the same principles applied by the artist can be used by a writer to create stories, poems, and essays, which can come alive with detailed description. Themes, symbolism, setting, and even dialogue all benefit from drawing parallels between visual art and the written word. As students increase their observation skills, they can be taught to show—not tell—vivid textures in their writing.

Furthermore, prints and photographs can be used as writing prompts. Given Delacroix’s painting, students can be asked to write in multiple genres, such as essays on the nature of love, research papers discussing the role of gender dynamics, or creative writing dealing with suicide. For example, students can be asked to write a descriptive essay based on the details of the painting or compose a short story based on the content. Or students can be asked to write poetry or narratives based on the painting. Putting the desperate thoughts of the *Migrant Mother* into verse or dramatizing her conversation with her family is a natural writing extension provided by this provocative work.

Depending on the context of the lesson, art can serve to teach or practice any number of writing genres. In *Looking to write: Students Writing Through the Visual Arts*, Mary Ehrenworth (2003) uses art to teach students about different writing genres. Through a number of Picasso’s paintings, she teaches students to look closely at art and use their interpretations of the art to write poetry. Likewise, Tom Romano (2000) presents numerous ways to teach writing through the arts in *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multi-Genre Papers* by integrating various visual formats into students’ book reports, research papers, and creative writing assignments.

Visual art, then, serves as a tool to build background knowledge, support and develop literary themes, encourage writing, and teach writing genres. These tools can be very

helpful, but probably the most important reason to incorporate visual art in the classroom is because it can be used to help students and teachers think deeper and more critically.

Reason Three: The Visual Arts Encourage Critical Thinking

Art is more than just a pretty and novel way of teaching other English skills. In and of itself, visual art provides opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills. The true power of using visual art in the language arts classroom lies not with achievement in other academic areas, but in visual art’s unique contributions, including the fostering of critical thinking. One way that students often show off their critical thinking skills is through a literary analysis. The same skills involved in analyzing a work of literature are used in interpreting a work of visual art.

Interpreting visual art is similar to interpreting a literary work. Just as literary analysis often involves making an argument about themes, concepts, and forms of or between literary works, interpreting art asks the viewer to make similar arguments to interpret the work. Furthermore, just as in reading, where the reader has a transaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1975), a viewer transacts with a piece of art. Students must bring their own experiences and knowledge to a painting to make sense of it. In short, “to interpret a work of art is to make it meaningful” (Barrett, 2003 p. 1).

To analyze a painting, a viewer must use background knowledge of the content and artist; comprehend the overall meaning of the painting by understanding the colors, lines, symbols, etc. (much like a reader must decode a text by understanding the letters, words, sentences, and ideas of a text); and analyze, synthesize, and finally evaluate the painting. In his text on interpreting art, art educator and professor Terry Barrett (2003) explains when interpreting art, “[t]he critical activities of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about a work of art are interrelated and interdependent” (p. 198).

To illustrate, let’s take the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and the mural-sized (11ft by nearly 26ft) painting *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso. *To Kill a Mockingbird* tells the story of Atticus Finch, the town lawyer who dares to defend a black man for crimes he did not commit. The novel deals with themes of racism, inequality, and moral duty. Picasso’s *Guernica* depicts the bombing of the Basque town Guernica by Germany’s troops in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. Guernica was known as a town that housed Republican forc-

es. General Franco of the opposing Nationalist party, which was supported by the Nazis, told the Nazis that they could test new weapons and tactics on the city. Most of the men in Guernica were away fighting in other areas of the country, which left mostly women and children in the city when it was bombed. Picasso's painting shows the tragedies of war and the suffering that war causes. The painting has long since become a symbol against war.

Understanding either of these works means understanding at least some of the historical context behind them. When introducing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, teachers often discuss the Great Depression and Jim Crow laws. To understand Picasso's work also means understanding the historical context of the Spanish Civil War and the events leading up to World War II. In interpreting the painting it is also helpful to understand Picasso's past works and the artist movement of Cubism.

Terry Barrett (2003) suggests these two principles for interpreting art: "All art is in part about the world in which it emerged," and "All art is in part about other art" (p. 198). This can be said for many literary works as well. Interpreting Lee's novel means understanding how her novel is situated in its historical time period. Furthermore, these works can be compared to other works of the same themes. Picasso's work could be contrasted with artwork from the French Revolution, such as Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, which glorified war and heroes or compared to more recent artists, such as street graffiti artist Banksy, who spray paints his anti-war art on public buildings and streets. *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be compared to other works about racism, such as *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, or compared to other books about the Great Depression, like the YA novel *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse.

In order to interpret a work of art, the viewer needs to be able to express that interpretation through language. So, demonstrating critical thinking skills through a literary analysis is the same as demonstrating them through interpreting art. Both need to be written or spoken. Visual art then, provides an engaging way for students to practice or develop those critical thinking skills.

Implications

If we think about art as defined by Mitchell (1994) that, "all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no purely visual or verbal arts" (p. 5), then integrating the visual arts into the classroom makes per-

fect sense as the two are intricately intertwined. The verbal and visual arts enhance and strengthen understanding and themes in each other. As students are engaged in literacy experiences based in visual art, "their understanding of literacy expands and images become powerful texts" (Van Horn, 2008 p. 13). In fact, it is the concept of treating visual art as a text that makes the connection to reading and writing the strongest.

The reasons set forth above are not the only benefits of using visual art in the classroom; they are just some of the rationale for why language arts teachers would want to incorporate them in their classroom. Jerome Kagan (as cited in Baker, 2012) listed some of the other benefits of incorporating the arts. He states that the outcomes of incorporating the arts:

. . . include imagination, expression, empathy, interpretation, inquiry, reflection, and responsibility. Arts education produces other positive outcomes as well, including strengthening students' self-confidence, personal and social agency, schematic and procedural thinking, aesthetic productivity, and collaborative production. (p. 24)

The good news for English teachers is the ease with which visual arts can be integrated into the classroom. With a wealth of resources available online, such as Google's Art Project and The Kennedy Center's ARTSEDGE, bringing high-quality art into the classroom has never been easier. These sites also provide numerous lesson plans, study guides, games, and supplemental materials. Incorporating visual arts into the ELA classroom not only breathes new life into tired, monotonous strategies, but more importantly, engages unmotivated students and makes them think more critically and deeply. With a few well-considered works of art (and a solid plan for their use in a literacy-based implementation), English teachers can open new worlds of understanding and fluency in our students.

Resources for Integrating Art into the ELA Classroom

Wilhelm, J. (2004). *Reading IS Seeing: Learning to Visualize Scenes, Characters, Ideas, and Text Worlds to Improve Comprehension and Reflective Reading*. New York: Scholastic Publishing.

Wilhelm's text provides great strategies and project ideas for incorporating art

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into the secondary classroom. It is written and organized for practicing teachers, so it is quick and to the point. While the book does focus on reflective reading and comprehension, many of the included teaching strategies have a writing component.

Ehrenworth, M. (2003). *Looking to Write: Students Writing Through the Visual Arts*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Looking to Write is a look into the four ways that Ehrenworth uses art to teach writing. She shows how to teach poetry, narrative writing, short stories, and how to write purposefully and clearly using art. She suggests a number of materials (many of which can be found on the companion website) and strategies and project ideas.

Barrett, T. (2003). *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing.

Art educator and Professor Terry Barrett writes about how to interpret a work of art in this clearly written and easy to understand text. Using examples, he takes the reader through the entire process of interpreting a work of art. While this text is geared toward art educators language arts teachers will find the strategies and ideas helpful in incorporating art into their classroom. This is also a great text for those who feel that their knowledge of art is limited.

Romano, T. (2000). *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Romano demonstrates the use of multigenre writing in the Language Arts classrooms. Projects that incorporate diaries, photos, letters, etc., in addition to traditional expository writing, allow students to interact with their subject in meaningful and engaging ways. Multigenre projects can be completed in a variety of media (text-based, digital, audio, traditional graphics) and tap into the multiple strengths of students.

Google Art Project

<http://www.googleartproject.com>

The Google Art Project has just been upgraded to its second version and includes artwork from over 150 museums

around the world. For each picture the user can zoom in so closely that brush strokes and imperfections on the painting can be seen and a short description of the work is also provided. There is also a section dedicated to educators suggesting lesson plans and teaching ideas.

Kennedy Center Arts Edge

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org> Instituted by the Kennedy Center in 1996, ARTSEDGE reaches out to schools, communities, individuals and families with printed materials, classroom support, and internet technologies. The site contains a collection of free digital resources—including lesson plans, audio stories, video clips, and interactive online modules.

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