

Open Your Eyes to Art & Visual Literacy

Kim Woodruff

In just a short time the world has experienced a technology boom which has had a profound effect on the lives of the students we teach. "Watching TV, playing video games, listening to music, and surfing the Internet have become a full-time job for the typical American child," said Drew Altman, Ph.D., president of the Kaiser Family Foundation. Students are living in a world where more and more information is delivered by a television or video screen. The time is now to become concerned about the messages and information our students are getting from these media, both advantageous and unfavorable.

Multiplying Multimedia

Multimedia is the use of computers to present text, graphics, video, animation, and sound in an integrated and meaningful way. It has given learners new tools to convey ideas and understand knowledge. The Internet has enabled our students to communicate and exchange ideas across the world. Technology has brought about information and media literacy that can no longer be overlooked in our students' education. In a world with technology, language is no longer the only important form of literacy that must be taught!

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The Origins of Visual Literacy

The concept of visual literacy was formulated by Jack Debs in 1966. He believed that a thoughtfully designed visual vocabulary could be arranged to mean different things.

Visual literacy can be defined as the capability to establish meaning from visual images.

One argument for teaching visual literacy is


that it promotes the enrichment of cognitive skills. It allows students to gain powerful tools for developing and enhancing creativity. A second argument is for self-defense. In a world that is constantly bombarded with a plethora of images, many are superficial, distasteful, and obnoxious. Students need the necessary skills to help them decode and understand the messages these images imply.

The Value of Art Education

Art instructors know a rich art program is significant to a child's development and education. An art class encourages creative expression and develops artistic skills in drawing, painting, and sculpting. Students do not only make art but are taught to look, appreciate, and respond to it or develop visual literacy. In no other area of study is the visual image held in such high esteem. But are our students getting enough instruction to develop essential visual literacy skills when art programs are not always considered as equal to other academic subjects and are usually one



of the first programs to be cut or shorted when budgets get tight?

Recently while driving down a local highway, I notice a billboard with a message from the Americans for the Arts organization, inquiring whether students are getting their fair share of art at school and, if not, to ask for more. It is a sad commentary in a nation as rich as ours that one would see this message on a highway billboard. A school district with a fine academic reputation adjacent to my home town is cutting art at the middle school next year because a school levy failed earlier this year. Will our students be able to function and compete in a world of technology if they are not given chances to develop all the necessary skills? 

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

WEB LINKS

members.ozemail.com.au/~cumulus/digcam.htm
home.inreach.com/kumbach/velcro.html
hoaxbusters.ciac.org
www.clemusart.com

What You Can Do to Expand Visual Literacy

- Plan lessons that will incorporate images your students see every day on television that are associated with clothing and shoes they wear and symbols or icons of products they may buy and use.
 - Have your students explore visual images around school, in their homes, and on the streets.
 - Have students look at and discuss artwork from the Pop Art Movement such as work by Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Dennis Hopper, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Jasper Johns.
 - Share contemporary examples of artists working with visual culture.
 - Have your students use digital cameras. In addition, allow your students to manipulate and change images with scanners and photo-editing tools. Make them aware that anyone can change a photograph or picture using a computer and an editing tool.
- Have your class look at Web sites. Teach them to question if the author of a Web site is credible and reputable. It is fun to visit hoax web sites; such as hoaxbusters.ciac.org.
- Join your local art museum. Membership will allow you to visit most traveling exhibits at no extra cost.
 - Finally, let everyone know (your principal, members of your board of education, parents, and community) that you teach "visual literacy," the fourth "R"! Art has always been vital to education but in the world of technology it's playing a greater role!