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Finding Space and Time for the Visual in K–12 Literacy Instruction

Dawnene D. Hassett and Melissa B. Schieble contend that literacy instruction must include attention to the multiple ways in which print and visual images work together. They propose ways to update accepted reading strategies “with visual texts and new literacies in mind.” Using examples from picture books and graphic novels, they expand our understanding of how readers extend three cueing systems—graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic—to negotiate multiple levels of meaning in visual texts.

The social, cultural, and political environment shaped by globalization has seen an emergence of greater reliability on visual modes of communication. Television, film, and the Internet have become major sources of public information and communication. In addition, the texts students encounter today embody cues for reading that extend beyond the letters and words on the page, requiring readers to actively focus on textual elements beyond the decoding of print (Hammerberg [Hassett], “Reading” 207). The computerization of type design and the photomechanical printing technologies available today make it possible for alphabetic text to intermingle with graphics, extending the ways in which thought may be represented. New technologies make it possible to provide interactive, nonlinear, and hypertextual forms of communication that rival the printed word, thus expanding and challenging notions of representation and interpretation commonly associated with traditional printed texts. Gunther Kress asserts that “the potentials of electronic technologies will entrench visual modes of communication as a rival to language in many domains of public life” (“Visual” 55).

Meanwhile, back at the school, literacy instruction is dominated by traditional texts and alphabetic print. Visual modes of communication are seen as secondary to print, technology instruction is placed alongside or separate from literacy

instruction, and new technologies are often used to teach traditional, print-based concepts. Yet, if the visual is to be entrenched or saturated to the point of rivalry with the verbal as a primary mode of communication, what does this mean for education?

One implication is that we need to understand and teach how images and printed text work together in multiple ways. Following Carolyn Handa, who states that “finding space for the visual in the curriculum is possible without sacrificing the course goals of developing careful thinkers and thoughtful writers” (9), we suggest ways to find space for the visual within existing methods of literacy instruction so that new literacies and new texts can be used in the classroom without sacrificing curricular goals. Specifically, we look at accepted reading strategies for the purpose of updating them with visual texts and new literacies in mind.

New Literacies: From Theory to Practice

Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel offer us two different ways of thinking about “new literacies,” one ontological and one paradigmatic (16–17). First, an ontological shift means that texts have changed because they look different from traditional print-based texts where graphemes are the primary carrier of meaning.¹ In part a product of new technologies, such as photomechanical printing technologies or

digital technologies that allow combinations of sound, print, and images, texts for children today produce a situation where alphabetic print must be understood as only a partial transporter of meaning. These kinds of texts require new ways of reading, writing, interpreting, and interacting, and they also indicate the possibility for a shift in the ways we might think about literacy as a school subject (Bearne 14).

For example, in Jules Feiffer's *Meanwhile*, a text that borrows a comic book style, a mother (we presume) is screaming (we presume), "Raymond!" (1), but in the book itself, there are no quotation marks around "Raymond," and there is no signifying trailer, such as, "Mom yelled." Instead, the size and placement of his name on the page, shaped in a megaphone kind of configuration with "noise" lines running through it, are signs that let us "know" that Raymond's mom is yelling his name. So, using this example, we can define *text* as the cohesive whole of a document, including words, images, design, and their relations.

Second, sociocultural theories of language and literacy, such as those developed and explained by James Paul Gee, Shirley Brice Heath, Bertha Pérez, and Brian V. Street, provide a paradigmatic shift to the ways we can think about literacy learning. This means that our models of thinking about literacy learning (our paradigms) have moved away from psychological theories, where learning to read is thought to happen in the head, to an understanding of literacy as always embedded within a social context and purpose for meaning-making. In sociocultural theories, the sense that readers are able to make out of a text is shaped by the experiences, background knowledge, and social/cultural identities that they bring to a reading. Where visual/text relations are concerned, we would add that the makeup of the text itself, and what the reader is to do with it, helps to shape the meaning that the reader takes away as well. The text as a whole, with images, graphics, placement of print, and so on, helps to shape the sociocultural plane on which readers are situated when they make sense of a text.

Sociocultural theories become an important tool for thinking about the role of the reader in constructing meaning out of visual/text relations. When we understand that "comprehension" involves social and cultural practices (Hammerberg [Hassett], "Compre-

hension"), we can also recognize that there are new social and cultural practices at play when new forms of text are used. Charles A. Hill notes that "comprehending and interpreting any image . . . requires an active mental process that is driven by personal and cultural values and assumptions" (113); in texts where images carry a great deal of meaning, the meaning at large may shift and change depending on each individual's interpretation. The paradigmatic shift for education, then, is about leaving behind the idea that texts "contain" information that readers "receive" and moving toward an understanding that meaning is produced through active negotiation, conversation, and communication of individual values and thoughts. Sociocultural forms of "new literacies" involve an understanding that specific codes, such as an alphabetic sign system, don't mean anything outside of the context of the text, including its images, or the social and cultural practices that the readers bring.

For Kress, the complexity of text/image relations lies in the fact that images afford different ways of shaping knowledge, imagination, and design, rather than functioning simply as an illustrative feature for the written text. He articulates this point by stating, "the assumption is that some things are best done by using writing, and others are best done by using images" ("Visual" 63). We would add to this that some things are best done by combining print and image (the verbal and the visual), because, as Handa notes, "today's documents are increasingly hybrids of words, images, and design" (9). Rather than drawing a division in instruction between understanding the visual and the verbal, this relationship should be considered as epistemologically interconnected. Instruction ought to "[require] readers and writers to have a richer understanding of how words and images work together to produce meaning" (Stroupe and Welch 109).

In the remainder of this article, we employ these understandings of new literacies—both ontological and paradigmatic—to examine images as "complex texts in their own right" (Hill 121). While current research and pedagogy in reading

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have been built on a traditional notion of text that leads to a particular notion of good reading instruction, we wish to build on existing reading research, especially the theories that highlight the active role of the reader in making meaning out of text, to update reading instruction to include new forms of texts and new literacies. To that end, we consider how reading strategies can be applied when various text/image affordances are in play, and we analyze how images and print work together to scaffold meaning-making in a sociocultural sense.

Space for the Visual in Reading Strategies

Carrie Rood notes that “in the age of the visual image,” students must be able to implement “a set of skills in order to interpret the content of these visual images, their social impact, and their ownership” (111). We heartily agree, but the skill set that readers must employ to interpret the visual might begin with an updated notion of traditional reading strategies. In traditional reading theory, readers gain meaning from print by coordinating three basic cueing systems: graphophonic cues, or the print within the words and sentences; semantic cues, or the meaning; and syntactic cues, or the grammatical language structure.² A strategic reader searches for information from these cueing systems and deciphers the meaning by thinking about what the print looks like (graphophonic), whether it makes sense (semantic), and whether it sounds right (syntax).

With texts that combine print and images, all three cueing systems are also available, but there are more cues to negotiate—some in print, some in images, some from the reader’s background and sociocultural identities. This sets up a new context for making sense of text.

Graphophonic (Visual) Cues

Graphophonic cues are visual to the extent that readers must pay attention to the symbols of written language. In early literacy instruction, young readers are taught to pay attention to directionality, letters, beginning and ending sounds, words, spaces, and punctuation (Hassett, “Signs”). However, reading from left to right and top to bottom is not always possible in texts that combine print and images to convey meaning.

For example, in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, half of the dedication page is written in huge, block print upside down, with a note right side up saying the following:

I know. I know. The page is upside down. I meant to do that. Who ever looks at that dedication stuff anyhow? If you really want to read it—you can always stand on your head. (1)

The upside-down block print carries meaning and direction outside of the dedication message. The text, right side up, demands to be read: The image of the little character, Jack, holding the loud dedication page upside down, is a direct address to the reader to turn the book around (or else stand on your head). It is up to the reader, not the author, to decide how (or whether) to engage with particular textual aspects. This type of text contains signs to consider beyond the print itself: ways of knowing what to do with the text and ways of understanding its demanding, yet humorous, meaning.

Print-image relations also add an additional level of information to be “decoded” through graphics, color, size, and shape, as in the example of Raymond’s mom yelling his name in *Meanwhile*. In Jonathan London’s *Froggy Gets Dressed*, Froggy’s mom yells his name, too, in large, capital, purple letters across page 8, in orange letters on page 14, and in red later on (London 17). Emotion is carried in these color changes, and the *idea* of yelling is carried throughout. Comprehending Mom’s meaning requires more than decoding: it requires drawing on one’s own knowledge of color, placement, and yelling moms.

While we have been using examples of picture books for children to illustrate the types of visual cues available beyond letters and words on a page, these same cueing systems are available in picture books for secondary students. In other words, this is not just an issue for elementary literacy instruction. Anne Burke and Shelley Stag Peterson argue that “[m]any picture books today explore complex themes and address topics appropriate for secondary school students” and that “picture books offer a medium for teaching visual and critical literacy across the curriculum in secondary classrooms” (74). Likewise, Elizabeth Schmar-Dobler notes that

reading on the Internet requires students to effectively “use links, headings, graphics, and video and audio clips” to gather information (80). Thus, visual cues are not just for beginning readers.

Semantic Cues

Readers use semantic cues to determine what makes sense. Traditionally, this means that as readers decode print from left to right, they check to see whether what they are reading makes sense. However, with texts that combine images and print, the meaning must be constructed by paying attention to both words and pictures. For example, David Macaulay’s *Black and White* contains four stories occurring on the page all at once, mostly through illustrations but also through accompanying print for each story. A “warning” on the title page reads, “This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended” (1). The reader, not the author, decides how to proceed and where to focus attention. Readers can choose to follow one story through the whole book, look at the stories simultaneously, compare similar images in all stories, compare continuities among stories, or follow the story or stories in other ways. Interestingly, a main character in each story is a robber, who is never referred to in the text alone. The presence of the robber, though, helps to scaffold an understanding of the print—without the robber, the text makes no sense.

Graphic novels for adolescents also necessitate a reading of print and images to create meaning because much of the meaning is carried in the image itself. The print becomes a tool or a scaffold for making meaning of the image, versus the traditional notion of images illustrating print. Graphic novels are best understood as “a language, [whose] vocabulary is the full range of visual symbols” (McCloud 1).

For example, in *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, the shading of Marjane’s face shows her internal conflict. She is torn from within about the freedoms that she has within her household versus the oppression she faces outside of the home or at school, and this anguish is represented by the images more than the print. To

demonstrate this point, on page 25, Marjane’s face is shaded (showing conflict) even when she is verbally not talking about conflict. In fact, she says she wants to take a bath. Yet in earlier frames, her mother discussed her own fears growing up that her father would be taken to prison for his communist views, how prison destroys, and so forth. Marjane carries this with her (represented visually) even when saying something relatively mundane and everyday. This demonstrates that the visual does carry more information than the print alone, and in this case, it provides a semantic cue for interpreting meaning. “I want to take a bath” here can mean “I want to cleanse myself of these thoughts,” but only in combination with the image.

The text-image relationship, then, requires an active reader to make meaning using his or her socio-cultural knowledge and background to make the images come alive in relation to the print. In reading graphic novels, semantic cues include the image itself as a carrier of meaning, and the image becomes a significant way to check whether one’s interpretations of the text are acceptable and consistent.

Syntactic Cues

Syntax in linguistic terms is typically the study of the rules of a language (e.g., grammatical structures); syntactic cues embedded in various language patterns and genres help to inform the reader about word meaning. However, in logical terms, syntax is also a branch of study that looks at how various signs are arranged or can be arranged. With texts that use the visual

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From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

as a primary carrier of meaning, images can also be seen as a sign system, and syntactic cues for the interpretation of text-image relations are also held in the arrangement and tone (e.g., color, design layout, harshness of line) of the image itself.

The relationship between images and printed text can be synergistic, where the message must be read through images-as-text in ways that make it difficult to say where meaning lies, in the words or in the images. Eliza T. Dresang describes synergy this way: “In the most radical form of synergy, words and pictures are so much a part of one another that it is almost impossible to say which is which” (88). Text becomes a conglomeration of both. Words appear *in* pictures and *over* pictures in ways that require a nonliteral reading of the printed text, for to only read the words for their literal meaning would be to leave with no meaning whatsoever. One example of this is a photo of an attorney in Virginia Walter’s *Making Up Megaboy*, on whose face is superimposed a series of printed sentences, not in lines but contoured to the face, that ramble in pointless concern over a serious juvenile crime:

Mr. Jones does not realize the seriousness of Robbie’s situation. His son committed a capital crime, a felony, to which there was a witness and to which he has confessed. There are no facts in dispute about his actions. It is just fortunate that he hadn’t turned fourteen; I don’t think I could have prevented his being tried as an adult if he had been a year older. I think I might have been more effective in securing an alternative treatment facility for Robbie if his father had been cooperative with the social workers and probation officers who were investigating his case. We were unable to establish any motive for the crime. To this day, I don’t know why Robbie Jones killed Jae Lin Koh. I wonder if Robbie even knows why he did it. He’ll have a lot of time to think about it. He won’t be released until he is twenty-five. (57)

There is noise in the graphic, layered words contoured on a face, but the words mean nothing compared to the synergy between photo and text, which says how nobody can explain, how nobody knows why, how in the end there is no answer. The words babble with no new information: “this attorney . . . talks a lot but knows nothing” (Dresang 88H). Thus, the syntactic cues for reading this synergistic image include the design and layout of the text,

where the reader makes meaning out of the “grammatical” placement of the images as combined and integrated with print.

In graphic novels, syntactic cues for making meaning lie in abundance in the image itself. A frame from *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale/My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman contains print that is limited, stating above the image, “Anja and I didn’t have where to go,” and below the image, “We walked in the direction of Sosnowiec—but **where to go?!**” The literal meaning of the print is clear: The characters are without a place to seek refuge and safety. However, the power and emotion of this frame lies in how the text and the image work together.

Scott McCloud comments on the inaccurate public perception that comics offer “a *linear, plot driven form*, lacking prose’s ability to handle *layers of meaning—subtext—*within a story” (31; italics in original). Clearly, *Maus I* contains layers of subtextual meaning that may not be possible to re-create in print alone. In this frame, the couple is portrayed as small and in shadow, before a crossroads path that is configured as the Nazi swastika. The trees alongside



From *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale/My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman, Copyright © 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986 by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House Inc., and the Wylie Agency.

the path are empty and dismal, emphasizing the desolate future ahead for Vladek and his wife. The layout of the path and the cold, empty landscape foreshadow the events that this couple face later in the novel: at this stage in the novel, the Nazis are so prolific in this region that any path the couple follows will lead to an eventual concentration camp (hence the swastika). Perhaps the leafless, rail-thin trees symbolize the extreme hunger and fatigue that Vladek and Anja will face. In the horizon of this image lies an industrial-looking building, with smoke rising from one of its stacks; the subtext of this particular part of the image may also foreshadow the gas chambers that await them in the camp.

Syntactically, the spatial arrangement of this image carries almost the entire meaning in this frame. The smoke-billowing building is projected with distance from the couple, yet within sight, much like the actual events as the novel unfolds. The cues for making meaning lie almost entirely in the image; the print works as a scaffold for relaying that the couple have nowhere to go, but the power of this frightening truth lies in the image and its spatial arrangement.

Conclusion

New forms of texts, which do not rely primarily on alphabetic print, require readers to negotiate multiple levels of meaning while constructing connections within and across various textual elements. In hybrid texts, the visual takes on a distinct role. It carries information differently than alphabetic print by calling on emotional and affective associations in the reader's/viewer's mind. Unlike writing, which depicts "*{t}he world told*" through arguments sequentially arranged with logic and evidence, the visual evokes "*the world shown*" (Kress, *Literacy* 1; italics in original) through spatial arrangement and display.

To help students negotiate this "world shown," we might begin by updating our reading cueing systems to encompass a greater scope. For example, visual cues clearly extend beyond the sign systems of print and now include images, graphics, and the look of the word on the page. Likewise, meaning and structural cues can now be derived from textual placement, image/text relations, and the synergy between words and pictures. Teachers can explore with their students the multiple layers in a text:

many sources of information to draw on, many possible interpretations, and many choices for interacting with the text.

Our students encounter new forms of text that indicate new ways of reading, interpreting, interacting, and thinking in their everyday lives; yet, literacy instruction is currently dominated by traditional texts in schools. However, finding space and time for the visual in K–12 literacy instruction is not only possible when new literacies and new texts can be used in the classroom without sacrificing curricular goals, it is also necessary in a world influenced by changing forms of communication, information, and mass media.

Notes

¹See Bolter; Burbules and Callister; Dresang; Kress; Landow; Lanham; or Snyder for a full description of how texts have changed ontologically.

²See, for example, Adams; Allington; Pressley.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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The authors share several visual modes of communication that help students see the relationship between graphics and text. Graphic novels are great models to use, and the authors suggest *Persepolis*. “Gaining Background for the Graphic Novel *Persepolis*: A WebQuest on Iran” further explores this text. *Persepolis* is set in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. This lesson includes a WebQuest in which students research relevant and reliable information in groups, and a technology-enhanced presentation that allows them to share the information with their classmates. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1063