

Book Review of “Visual Literacy: Learn to See, See to Learn”

The author, Dr. Lynell Burmark, an experienced k-16 educator, the cofounder of VisionShift International and an Associate in the Thornburg Center for Professional Development, based on her teaching experience and some studies that have been done in the visual literacy field, shows the audience the power of the visuals on education and offers a wealth of practical tips and strategies for effective presentations. This book can be used in Educational Technology field for educators to utilize the techniques and some tools of visuals to facilitate teaching and learning.

The book give the teachers and students the notion that visual literacy, a learned skill, is a very important cornerstone of communication in the 21st century, the age where photos, videos, and films are so pervasive that people deal with these visual information everyday. It also provides the educators some techniques how to use these powerful tools (visuals) and strategies into their teaching to make the materials more visually attractive and thought-provoking, which in turn, make teaching and learning more effective.

The author begins this book with the claim that visual literacy is a learned skill; it takes work, study and practice, and then move along with the definition and history of visual literacy; the compare and contrast of words and images; uses and impact of different typefaces and fonts; the effects of color; the enrichment of the classroom and classroom

activities with visual information; one new approach to presentations; the combination of real and virtual worlds.

The statement that visual literacy is a learned skill, not an intuitive one is supported by many different researchers' studies. In "Visual "Literacy": Image, Minds, and Reality", Messaris concludes that visual literacy ``does not come naturally to most people [and]... appear[s] to rest on exceptional experience or on explicit training". (Messaris, 1996)

Yenawine claim that visual literacy should be seen as a slow developing set of skills and understandings and it progress unevenly, each step building on earlier ones, each dependent on certain kinds of exposure and instruction (Yenawine, 1997).

What is visual literacy? The author mentions experts offer differing opinions on its definition. Based on Jerry Christopherson's presentation at an International Visual Literacy Association Conference, the author describes what a visually literate person should be able to do: (1). Interpret, understand...(4)Use visual..., etc. (p3)

In chapter2, the author compares the verbal and visual information, and concludes that for younger students, "It's easier to process concrete objects and images rather than abstract concepts like words and ideas." (P12). I agree with this point. Based on these past three years learning experience in US (one's native language is not English while is taught in English), I feel abstract words or ideas are hard to understand comparing to the concrete images or pictures, so I prefer to learn with the help of visuals. In "Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective", Stokes states that visualization can help learners make more sense of data that may have seemed previously unintelligible and using visual treatments in lessons can enhance learning with some degrees of success. (Stokes, 2001)

In Chapter 3, the author discusses the uses and impact of different typefaces and fonts. As the author said, the type of the text should “make the words easy to read and provide a suitable background.” (p20) All of us have the experience that we will feel the text easy to read and more attractive if the text are in appropriate typefaces, while versus, hard to read if the typefaces are inappropriate. The author also mentioned appropriate typefaces can help convey the mood and meaning of particular communications. This point could be more convincing if the author can give further explanation and more example about this from the perspective of psychology and aesthetics.

In Chapter 4, the author analyzes meaning and effects of color. Based on the Stroop exercise and some other activities, the author claims that “color evokes responses and contributes to meaning in powerful ways.” (p32) Stokes also stated that the color graphics used in instructional modules can promote achievement, particularly when learning concepts compare to black and white graphics. (Stokes, 2001) The author mentions one study conducted by Henner Ertel, director of the Institute for Rational Psychology in Munich, one particular interesting finding of this study is that for the classrooms, the best colors are light blue, yellow, yellow-green, and orange, and the teachers could raise students' IQs by using those colors in classrooms. (p35). I agree that certain color can stimulate the corresponding emotion, but I doubt that the colors' function to increase students' IQs. Somewhat questionable, it's really an interesting finding, and I believe it can be applied in some way into the education, by which teachers can make the classroom an effective learning environment where students feel more comfortable to communicate with each other and they are more motivating to learn. The author also

reminds the educators different societies often attach different meanings to colors. (p39) I agree with this point one hundred percent. In Chinese culture, the red color represents joy and festive events, while it is the sign of danger in American culture. This tells the educators that the colors should be used carefully when there are students from different cultures/countries in the classrooms.

Based on the analysis of the characteristics of visual materials, the author explains how to utilize these visuals to enrich the classroom and classroom activities in Chapter5, and how to make the presentations more powerful with the help of visuals in Chapter6. The author clearly states that by reading and “writing” information in charts, graphs, and diagrams, the learners can comprehend that information at a higher level. With the massive usage of visuals everyday, images and graphics have revolutionized the way we process information, in and out of the classroom. (Burns, 2006). Drawing upon images and graphs can reinforce our writing as well. (Riesland, 2005). My own experience of writing paper also shows the graphs can help the writers organize the paper's structure and can stimulate the appearance of flow state in writing. The author then moves along to a new approach to presentations. She describes the way how to manipulate the elements of one presentation to make it more powerful such as the mood that presentation can bring the audience, the images/photographs used in the presentation, the usage of some design elements such as bullets, text, color, chart, etc in the presentation.

At the end of this book, from the constructivist approach, the author points out the students can build their own knowledge hierarchy in the real and virtual world with the help of visual literacy achieved step by step by studying the techniques used to create

images, learning the vocabulary of graphs and colors, and identifying characteristics of visuals.

This book was written with a coherent, clear structure that supported the authors' points of view. Written for teachers and students but not exclusively, this book is easy to read and understand. It can be used by classroom teachers, curriculum and staff developers, technology and media specialists, administrators and instructional leaders in their specific fields to enhance teaching and learning. This book can be used by students as well to help them achieve visual literacy step by step along the way of their study.

The points the author made in this book is pretty convincing, given the fact that there are many supporting studies and research presented throughout the book. Such as when the author try to draw the audiences' attention to the importance of visual literacy, she mentions one research which is conducted by 3M Corporation and found that humans process visual information 60,000 times faster than textual information. Some parts of the book could be more convincing if the author can dig deeper and give more explanation and examples when she made her points, such as the part I mentioned earlier, in Chapter3, the author states appropriate typefaces can help convey the mood and meaning of particular communications without giving further explanation from the perspective of psychology and aesthetics and more real examples. But that's not the focus of this book, and this could be omitted due to the limitation of the length of the book, so overall, this book is an excellent resource to help teachers and students become more effective communicators and understand how to use the power of visuals to their advantage.

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