VISUAL LITERACY, STANDARDS, AND THE USE OF VISUAL RESOURCES IN SCHOOLS

by

Norine C. Gaskill

An Abstract
of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
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ABSTRACT

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As the world continues to embrace technology, students are expected to possess the skills necessary to make meaning from images used in communication. Based on the heavy use of images on the Web to communicate meaning, for example, students will benefit from learning visual literacy. This literature review identifies the changes in literacy standards related to visual literacy and examines the use of visual resources in the classroom. The researcher found that visual resources such as those used in advertisements, videos, games, photos, picture books, and graphic novels enhance thinking and teach students about others. The researcher concludes that using visual resources to teach students transferable skills better prepares them for an environment, which requires the ability to make meaning from images as well as text.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Technology has transformed the way people live, communicate, and interact. This change has come at a consistently swift pace. High school graduates are held to a more elevated standard than those of past years (Wagner 8). Although educators have always aimed to prepare students for their future in higher education and careers, recently many educators have begun to include skills adequate for success in a digitally driven world. As technology becomes more prevalent in society, educators identify specific skills students will be expected to possess in order to be accomplished in their studies as well as their careers.

Technology makes it easier and less expensive to create, copy, and transmit digital images than print formats, thus there has been an increase in the use of images to communicate meaning. This is why education standards like the Common Core State Standards (reference) have included the use of a wider range of materials to establish more complex literacy standards, such as graphic novels, photos, charts, graphs, and maps (Allyn 11). Students of all ages are being taught to apply common literacy skills to visual images, no longer limiting the practice of these abilities to text (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 29). The American Association of School Librarians believes that “reading is the window to the world,” which applies not only to text based reading, but also images and video (“Empowering Learners” 11).

The development of visual literacy skills requires more than the use of technology to teach the skills associated with making meaning. Students can be taught to infer, understand, and create with visual resources, such as graphic novels, picture books, photography, advertisements, and videos. By using these resources to teach visual literacy skills, students are developing skills, which could be applied to other medias and materials. Because of the use of images in communication, even studying simple images like icons can teach students to apply
visual literacy skills in a practical way and as a foundational skill upon which complex visual literacy is built (Riddle 7).

There are other benefits to using visual resources in instruction that help develop students’ cultural knowledge as well. As the push for collaboration in education and the workplace increases, people are becoming more inclined to interact with others from around the world (Considine, Horton, and Moorman 479). Because not all people are able to experience the diverse societies of the world, visual resources can be used to introduce students to unfamiliar people, places, and customs. When students are able to see broader cultural structures they are more likely to make connections and develop understanding, so long as their visual literacy skills permit.

**Statement of the Problem**

Twenty-first century students have the reputation for being tech savvy (Schwarz 8). Although there is no empirical data to support this claim, this assumption highlights an area of growing concern. Because of the preponderance of technology students’ environments are visually saturated, and students are expected to make meaning from a wide variety of media, including Web based materials. The Common Core State Standards have identified essential skills for successful college or career bound students, some of which include making meaning from material not exclusive to text. Although the idea of reading images in the same manner as text is gaining support, there continues to be some resistance to the validity of the use of visual resources in the learning process. As educators begin to incorporate visual resources into their lessons and instruction, they will use resources like graphic novels, picture books, images, and maps to teach skills that are adaptable and applicable in many situations. College and career readiness now includes the ability to make meaning from images as well as text.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review the literature to further understand the current status of visual literacy and investigate the use of visual resources in students’ future success. A review of literature was conducted to find the role visual images play in the national curriculum standards. Possible uses of visual resources in the classroom were also investigated. The review of literature found that as educators look for ways to prepare children of all ages to be successful in a digitally driven future, an emphasis on visual literacy skills in schools has become an adequate response.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to shape the research presented in chapter 2. Answers to these three questions can be found in chapter 3.

1. Why has visual literacy been incorporated into 21st century student standards?
2. How can visual resources enhance thinking?
3. What can visual resources teach our students about the world?

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by a few factors; timeframe, access to information, and available research related to the topic. Due dates and deadlines were set for this course, which limited the amount of time available to collect reliable and relevant resources. Access to information was limited to the print and electronic resources available through James C. Kirkpatrick Library (JCKL). The research collected and used in the study was closely related to the topic of visual literacy and corresponding standards, but some sources included might not be classified as scholarly.
Definition of Terms

Millennials—Those born between 1980 and 2000. They are said to be the largest generation since the Boomers and also believed to soon be the most educated generation (Rainer and Rainer 2).

Visual literacy—The ability to read, interpret, understand, and create visuals and visual texts (Connors 72).

Visual resources—Resources that rely on images to communicate meaning equally, or in addition to text. Graphic novels, picture books, trading cards, photography, maps, etc. are all examples of visual resources.

Visual texts—Resources that are in a book format and use text and images to tell the story.

Design of the Study

The research study collected previously published information relating to visual literacy, and the use of visual resources in schools. There was no original research collected for this study. Rather, existing literature pertaining to the topic was reviewed for the purpose of this study.

The majority of articles were retrieved from the following databases, Academic Search Complete; Education Research Complete; ERIC; Humanities International Complete; MasterFILE Premier; ProQuest; ProQuest Central; and ProQuest Psychology Journals. A select few were taken from websites. Search terms included “teaching visual literacy,” “teaching literacy with visual texts,” “visual and media literacy,” “visual literacy and the classroom,” “graphic novels and teaching” “comprehending visual images,” “teaching expository text,” “role of media literacy in schools,” “learning with popular culture texts,” and “media literacy and millennials.” Along with the articles, several books were also used throughout the research. The
books were found using the Quest Library Catalog at JCKL. A key word search was used to locate books related to the topic. Terms include “literacy” and “visual literacy.”

**Conclusion**

This study includes three chapters related to school standards, which include visual literacy skills, the use of visual resources in the classroom to support those standards, and benefits to using visual resources in instruction. The second chapter is a review of the literature, which explores the standards and the use of visual resources. The third chapter consists of answers to the research questions posed in the first chapter and is followed by a list of references.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Not many can say they fully understood how quickly and significantly technologies would impact the world (Felten 60). The rapid pace of change has greatly affected today’s colleges, universities, and workplaces. They have much higher expectations of high school graduates than five years ago (Wagner 8). Parents, educators, colleges and universities, employers, and the general public search for the best ways to prepare children of all ages for a digitally driven future. Research supports the notion that an emphasis on teaching visual literacy in schools is an aspect of this instruction. This literature review will address the broadening definition of literacy skills, explain the use of visual resources, and show how those resources are being included as multimedia teaching tools, which can be valuable in preparing today’s students for collegiate study or prospective careers. This review will be divided into three sections. The first will address educational expectations for visual literacy. The second section identifies traditional and nontraditional visual resources that can be used to teach students to become better visual learners. The third section discusses the use of visual resources in teaching students about other cultures, genders, the world outside their own, and the problems that could arise from this.

Change in Literacy Paradigms and Education Expectations for Visual Literacy

With the rise of publications like the New Media Consortium’s Horizon Report, whose purpose is to identify emerging technologies and their potential impact on education, professionals in education as well as the business world identify the skills today’s students are expected to possess in order to be effective contributors to society. In this research for the best way to teach children of all ages to be prepared for a digitally driven future, emphasis is put on visual literacy skills in schools. This section first identifies the literacy standards schoolchildren
are expected to meet, focusing on the inclusion of visual literacy to enhance student success in careers or colleges. These expectations are detailed in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have currently been adopted by forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and four US territories, as well as by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). The latest CCSS and AASL standards reaffirm the value of reading as a foundational skill. The relationship between reading skills and visual literacy is described next. Finally in this section there is a discussion on visual texts and their relationship to the new standards.

Literacy

Literacy, in its most general term is defined as the ability to create and interpret messages using letters, or an alphabetic print, as a means of recording and sharing those messages (Kress 23). It can be argued that those who are truly literate also possess the ability to communicate orally as well as in print (Moje et al. 109). Cultures which consider forms of written and verbal communication skills directly connected with literacy also understand that the use of these skills are rooted in the culture’s social systems and practices (109). As communication methods continue to adapt to the digital world, even the most basic definition of literacy will soon require the inclusion of new technologies. This is evident in the current expectations employers have of the Millennial generation, such as familiarity with social media, photo sharing, use of applications for mobile devices and tablets, and ethical use of the Internet. Educators have had to broaden the definition of literacy to include more methods of making meaning and creating messages, the development of this term now includes visual literacies and also multiple literacies (109).

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1 Millennials are those born between 1980 and 2000. They are said to be the largest generation since the Boomers and also believed to soon be the most educated generation (Rainer and Rainer 2).
In 2007, the AASL included digital, visual, textual, and technological skills to the description of literacy (“Empowering Learners” 13). The AASL has also slightly changed the definition of visual literacy to include the use of images in the way learners think, process, and communicate meaning (“Empowering Learners” 24). The change in literacy skills means students are in need of a wider skill set in order to successfully produce and communicate meaning not exclusively through words (McDougall 27).

Research in regards to studying images can be traced back to the 1940s, but it has become more prevalent now that images have become closely associated with technology because cost of displaying images digitally is much less than in print form (27). In recent years visual literacy has become a focus in the transformation of traditional views on literacy. The idea of visual literacy is similar to that of Kress’s definition of traditional literacy. It can be defined as the ability to read, interpret, understand, and create visual texts (Connors 72). The ability to master the interpretation of visuals, such as graphic novels, photos, charts, graphs, and maps, is emphasized in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

The CCSS incorporate more complex and vigorous literacy standards across all disciplines and grade levels (Allyn 11). Even elementary students are expected to read with the intention of making meaning from materials not limited to text (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 29). Students are not only expected to memorize and repeat facts, but also to understand, appropriately interpret, gather meaning from, and possibly solve problems with the information gathered from a wide range of media and materials (Allyn 11). These are thought to be essential skills for students who are college or career bound and are learned through the use of both print and electronic texts, which include images and video (4). The CCSS have acknowledged the different options and expectation high school graduates face, which reinforces recognition of the
need to teach transferable literacy skills to college bound and non-college bound students (Wagner 9).

**Reading as a Foundational Skill**

With the current demands for the inclusion of new technologies for learning, in 2007 the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) developed modern standards highlighting the essential skills all learners are expected to obtain by the time they enter college or the workforce, which they entitled *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (“Empowering Learners” 11). These standards include nine common beliefs, the first of which is “Reading is the Window to the World” which suggests that literacy is the base upon which understanding is built regardless of the format, such as images, print, and video. This belief not only emphasizes the role reading has on the lives of learners, but also on the influence this fundamental skill can have on their futures. The AASL firmly supports the idea that personal growth is built through reading (4.1.1). Reading in relation to literacy is more than simply decoding text and symbols; it is the ability to comprehend, interpret, transfer, and create new understandings (Meltzer and Ziemba 22). The CCSS clearly supports the first belief in *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*; for example, “Read, view, and listen for information presented in any format. . . in order to make inferences and gather meaning” (1.1.6).

In an ongoing, longitudinal study in a large Midwestern city, 716 predominantly Latino adolescents were surveyed about their academic and extracurricular reading and writing practice. This study found that 92 percent of the adolescents surveyed admitted to reading some kind of text outside of their required reading for school three to four times per week. Of those 716 surveyed, 82 percent reported writing some kind of text outside of school related work three to four times per week (Moje et al. 120). These numbers appear to go against the popular belief that
today’s youth do not read or write outside of assigned work. The reason these reported percentages seem high is because these adolescents are not reading traditional published print literature, or writing stories for pleasure, but reading websites, letters, notes, and emails, and writing emails, chats, and blogs (124). The results indicate that students are using technology to read and write, which supports the push from the CCSS and the AASL for students to use a wider variety of formats to practice and become skilled users of media, which require the ability to make meaning.

**Visual Texts and the New Standards**

Now that communication is being made through a variety of media and environments that require users to be image and text literate, both image literacies and text literacies are now equally significant to students. The AASL believes that the ability to comprehend what is read, apply new understandings, and pinpoint and refine questions will depend on the how learners use information (“Empowering Learners” 22). This acknowledgement is also reflected in the Common Core State Standards which highlight the close connection between the strands for conceptual literacy and the processes of communication (Common Core State Standards 4).

In 2001 the Queensland School Curriculum Council released a new arts syllabus, which broadened the definition of traditional literacies to include visual literacy. A study was conducted to explore the reactions to the inclusion of visual literacy in their national standards by elementary school teachers in Queensland, Australia. The study found that many of the teachers felt this subject was not their concern and it should primarily be taught by the upper grades (McDougall 37). This is not an uncommon perspective in the United States, but the new standards are consistent for all grade levels. According to the CCSS reading for meaning is something all readers, from the youngest to the oldest, will be taught (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and
All learners are expected to be able to accurately use and assess content available in a wide variety of media, which includes visual and text-based formats (Common Core State Standards 10, 35). Here are a few examples of requirement for K-5 students from the CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy in History and Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects:

- With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear. (CCSS. RI.K.7)
- Use the illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas. (CCSS. RI.1.7)
- Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting or plot. (CCSS. RL.2.7)
- Explain how specific images contribute to and clarify a text. (CCSS. RI.2.7)
- Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story. (CCSS. RL.3.7)
- Analyze how visual multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text. (CCSS. RL.5.7)

The six examples have a common element; students are to make meaning and connections using the images included in their studies. These standards emphasize the necessity of strengthening visual literacy skills.

**The Need for Teaching Visual Literacy to Digital Natives**

The development and refining of visual literacy skills have become increasingly necessary since visual media has become strategically embedded in the lives of Millennials (Brumberger 21). As the researchers look for ways to prepare children of all ages to be successful in a digitally driven future, an emphasis on visual literacy skills in schools has become
one response. In this section the incorporation of visual literacy in classroom instruction supports the research, which identifies visual literacy skills as beneficial to student and career readiness. This section begins by addressing the misconception that today’s youth are better at reading images. This section also includes a defense for using visual texts like graphic novels and picture books as thinking tools for K-12 students. Also briefly discussed are resources that are not commonly associated with visual literacy and how they can be used to teach students.

**Millennials and Visual Literacy**

Teaching students to construct meaning from images and words in both the digital and physical formats is something educators are working on incorporating into curriculum because of the increased use of technology in the work place (Considine, Horton, and Moorman 479). Millennials are naturally fluent in the new technologies because they have been raised with electronics, such as cell phones, computers, gaming devices and consoles, and tablets. Those who believe the youth are highly skilled in new technologies also consider today’s students to be visually oriented and thus more likely to possess superior visual literacy skills (Brumberger 20). Currently little empirical evidence exists to support the assumption that millennials are better at analyzing and interpreting images and expressing themselves pictorially than they are at traditional reading and writing (21).

In 2009 a survey was conducted at Virginia Tech where approximately 500, 18- to 23-year-old undergraduate students at the university were asked about their technology and communication habits and abilities. The data presented in this survey only addressed the questions related to visual literacy. The results showed that those surveyed considered their skill level as limited proficiency. Participants were consistently weak in their ability to translate images and information and also scored low in their ability to respond critically to visual
materials (Brumburger 44). The findings of this survey did not support the claims that today’s students are intuitively acquiring visual literacy skills.

Several media, such as graphic novels, picture books, photography, advertisements, and videos, can be used in the classroom to sharpen visual literacy skills for a wide variety of abilities. Wagner suggests that the rapid pace of the digital age has impacted modern communication, and he believes it is almost impossible to adequately teach students literacy skills for each medium because of the rapid pace of change in technologies like Web tools, and communication tools (Wagner 9). Wagner also suggests that ways exist to have students transfer the visual literacy skills taught in every day instruction from visually oriented texts to digital texts and media (8).

**Using Visual Texts to Enhance Thinking**

The use of visual resources has not always had a strong associated with teaching literacy skills. Though picture books have had a strong connection to the traditional classroom they have not always been treated as more than books with pretty pictures (Haley 3). When they are used purposefully, picture books foster early visual and media literacy skills (3). The images can be studied in depth to develop higher order thinking skills in kindergarten through upper elementary classrooms by having students make connections between artistic choices and design and the information being presented (4).

Picture books can be used in a variety of ways. In a field study conducted in 2003 a group of seven sixth graders used picture books as a base for learning complex ideas and applying them to webpage creation (Luce-Kapler 5). Students used the picture books to make connections from the story to their own environments (5).
Like picture books, graphic novels can be used to teach thinking skills to students with widespread reading abilities. Visual texts like graphic novels provide an opportunity for readers to become engaged by the story and practice literacy skills alongside their classmates without having to be at the same reading level (Wagner 9). Graphic novels are often seen as easy reads, but they actually are useful in promoting traditional literacy in a new way by offering value and variety through the use of visuals (Carter 8). Just as “symbolism becomes more sophisticated and nuanced as the reading skills required to interpret text grow,” so does the level of image complexity and interpretation (Riddle 9). The combination of text and art requires readers to not only understand the words and illustrations but also read between the visual sequences to connect elements of the story and make meaning (Simmons 12). Visual texts, such as graphic novels, have been used to enhance writing assignments and to teach the literary terms and writing techniques required by the CCSS. Educators use graphic novels because they require students to use more complex cognitive skills than reading text alone, such as visual and spatial processing (Bucher and Manning 68).

Graphic novels can enhance the classroom environment by including those students who struggle with text-based comprehension and analysis during class discussions (Wagner 9). Whether a class is assigned a particular graphic novel or picture book, or they are viewing the panels simultaneously using a projector, students can interact with one another as they would when reading a text-based resource. An example of a way using a graphic novel could help with comprehension is while reading a play with complex language and action, like William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In figure 1 the final altercation between Tybalt and Mercutio is depicted. Even if the graphic novel version of this play is not used in its entirety, pages like
this once could be used to expand on areas of the text which are difficult to teenagers to understand.

Figure 1. Romeo and Juliet

From Romeo and Juliet: The Graphic Novel Original Text © Classical Comics Ltd. Reprinted by permission of Classic Comics. All rights reserved.
Visual texts introduce students to complex concepts in an interesting and engaging way without requiring them to read dense academic prose (Seyfried 45). For example in figure 1 the severity of Mercutio’s wound is downplayed by his language, making it difficult to understand his death. The body language and facial expressions used in figure 1 add to the complexity of the situation.

The subject matter in some graphic novels can successfully tackle college level concepts even undergraduate students struggle to comprehend (45). In figure 1 students can see betrayal, anger, aggression, and surprise, which happen to be concepts throughout Shakespeare’s works which are studied in college level courses. This supports the CCSS that focus on using texts that will prepare students for college or a career (CCSS 35).

Text and visual literacy can be learned simultaneously because text and images complement each other and do not require the reader to fully comprehend both for understanding and interpretation (Gillenwater 4). Those who gain the most from reading graphic novels and picture books are those who do not try to skim and rush through, but instead take time to look at every detail on the page (Seyfried 47). Graphic novels require readers to connect what is being communicated visually and textually, which requires them to use different navigation and comprehension strategies than when reading traditional books. Readers practice making meaning from sequence and spatiality, composition, and simultaneity (Serafini 343). Readers derive meaning from the special relations, grammar, and visual images (343). Some contend that using picture books and graphic novels is effective for teaching comprehension, because these resources necessitate the use of complex cognitive ability (Gillenwater 6).
Visual Resources Infrequently Associated with Pedagogy

Much of the world is bombarded with imagery in a deliberate attempt at communicating meaning (Heiligmann and Shields 41). Teaching students to read and communicate the meaning of images like those of simple signage, logos, and icons can prepare them to make sense of the world in a more practical manner (Riddle 7). For example, accurate identification of simple road signs can save time, money, or a life (7). Possessing the ability to read symbols and images is described as being a universal skill to the human experience regardless of school curriculum (7). This skill can be used as a foundation to build more complex visual intelligence, which is useful in looking at other common images with layered meaning, such as advertisements, political cartoons, and even trading cards.

Advertisements are designed to promote, sell, and market, and yet they reflect deep cultural significance (Malmelin 131). They can be used to study cultural expressions and beliefs and reflect upon morals and ideals (Howkins 57-59). In the most recent Natural American Spirit cigarette advertisement a great deal of information is conveyed with what appears to be a simple image; a blue background with a white leaf which appears to have a single drop of water rolling off the leaf. This advertisement was published in TIME Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in the World issue, in the Leaders section. Not only does its placement affect meaning, but the advertisement itself highlights the tobacco leaf and water, and other than the mandated warnings the text selected includes less than 100 characters. The strategic text includes the use of “additive-free,” which if skimmed could be read as addictive-free, and the images are quite simple and clean. It seems as though these cigarettes are all natural and crafted by Native Americans. Because advertisements influence and manipulate the view of the world, the ability to decipher meaning can impact a person’s decisions (Malmelin 140).
The use of layered meaning is not exclusive to advertising, but is present in other forms including political cartoons. Cartoonists attempt to capture the complexities of a monumental moment or idea in a lighthearted, serious, or even infuriating manner (Wosley 114). Well done political cartoons have layered meaning, and the subtleties and sophistication of the art can make the meaning difficult to decode even though they appear simple and straightforward (115). Identification of specific elements of graphic information relies heavily on prior knowledge of the cultural metaphor, but use of this resource will create an opportunity for students to see the world in different points of view (128).

Like political cartoons, collective card games (CCG) and trading card games (TCG) have proven to be effective visual teaching tools because of their multimodal principles (Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas 228). Card games like Pokémon combine attractive images, exciting characters, and minimal descriptive text, and students require a strategy and understanding of the use of each card in order to be successful traders (Vasquez and Smith 120). CCGs and TCGs do not directly teach traditional literacy skills, but these games can teach children to think visually and connectively (Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas 228). Those children who consider themselves skilled traders of TCG do not rely on the text when they are in the midst of a battle, but instead rely on the image to recall the power of the card (Vasquez and Smith 121). The deeper a collector goes into a game, the more complex his or her strategy becomes in order to become victorious. An essential skill in their triumphs of TCG collectors is the ability to read the images and symbols quickly (121). The complexity which comes from engaging collectors and traders prepares users for vocational careers because these skills are said to be more valuable than being able to write a story or deconstruct academic prose (Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas 228).
Visual Literacy and its use in Creating Cultural Connections

Images project mood, tone, and theme without using one word (Gorman and Eastman 93-94). Teaching children of all ages to be prepared for a digitally driven future is emphasized in the current standards with the inclusion of visual literacy skills as being appropriate to teach. In this section the use of visual resources are connected with the notion that they are tools that can broaden learners’ idea of the world and make them better prepared to communicate and collaborate with others. Next is an expansion on the idea that visual resources can teach students about the world around them. Along with the learning about the outside world pictorially, students can also learn about how they themselves may be viewed as well. This section concludes with potential problems that could arise while using visual resources to expose students to other cultures and how to address them.

Learning About Others

Many believe students are growing up in a visually saturated world (Seyfried 46). This nationwide acceptance arises from the amount of quality resources available on the Internet and in print for students, educators, and the general population (Felten 60). With the inclusion of these resources in classrooms and corporate settings, a wide variety of skills can be learned and practiced. One skill, which is not often thought of when addressing the use of visual resources, is the ability to learn pictorially about those unlike themselves (Wosley 128). To achieve success in 21st century professional environments and academic institutions students are expected to collaborate with people from all around the world (Considine, Horton, and Moorman 479).

Visual texts can also be used in understanding presentations of race, ethnicity, and gender (Seppanen 94). Seppanen highlights this as a significant aspect of visual literacy and believes visual resources can be used to develop the ability to process, distinguish, and challenge reality
and prejudices portrayed pictorially (94). Viewing cultural representations helps students to make meaning and connections as well as to determine accuracy and validity of an image (Fisher and Frey1-2; Haley 5). For example, it is not uncommon for juvenile literature to address sensitive subjects like sex, drugs, violence, yet graphic novels and anime tend to have the reputation of being overly controversial because they use images to communicate much of their story, which often focuses on social or political issues like racism, AIDS, and democracy (Schwarz 8). This is because students can identify the complex meaning of an image at a much faster rate than they can interpret the action printed in text.

When students possess the ability to “perceive the visible reality as part of broader cultural structures of meaning” then they are able to piece together an understanding of the culture represented in society (Seppanen 133). Learning about other cultures has never been easier. Schoolchildren can follow along with political issues such as the war in Iraq simply by viewing pictures taken and distributed by professionals and amateurs (Melson). It is for that very reason visual resources can positively or negatively influence a reader’s perception of the world, functioning as a valuable teaching tool, depending on the level of visual literacy a person possesses (Melson).

**Caution when Including Visual Resources in Instruction**

Though the inclusion of visual texts and media has become more prevalent in schools, educators are not expected to blindly incorporate them into instruction. In a study published in the University of North Carolina Press, Christa Boske and Susan McCormack examined a group of eleven high school aged Latino students and one male Latino teacher from an inner-city school and their understanding of implications made by an animated film. This film featured a penguin who is ostracized from his community for being different. He embarks on a journey to
find his place in the world. Although this film was award winning, it was also highly criticized by major news networks for its portrayal of specific ethnic groups and homosexual undertones (Boske and McCormack 172). Findings from this study suggest educators be cautious when incorporating the use of media in the classroom to exercise student meaning making skills (Boske 181-183). The students involved in this study became upset with those stereotypes portrayed in the film and were less willing to interact during the class discussion (181-183). This suggestion stems from the idea that the use of images, pictures, drawings, and videos depict people or places and can be interpreted at a more rapid pace than a text description. Images can make a quick impression because they can be interpreted in a plethora of ways. The research also indicated that this caution comes from the injustices and inequities present in visual representations of people and cultures (181-183).

Pictures are easily be misinterpreted or taken out of context because the most basic sense-making does not require readers of images to be highly skilled, even though deeper meanings can be present (176). Context also plays a powerful role on the viewer’s understanding of an image. In figure 2, in panels from Gene Luen Yang’s award winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, a young boy visualizes his cousin with harsh prejudice, but later realizes that he must accept himself and his family for who they are. If the underlying themes in this story were not known and only the images like the ones in figure 2 were seen, then some readers may believe this critically acclaimed book to be offensive.

Schools are expected to be places where differences in cultures, ethnicities, and religions are treated with respect and understanding. The treatment of those differences is directly and indirectly transmitted to students (169). When teachers use resources that visually depict any group, there ought to be a process of examination before students use them because the
misrepresentation or inaccuracies can distract from the intended focus and use of the resource (Haley 5). For example, picture books rely heavily on the images to tell the story and in many ways expose children to new and exciting concepts, but if the art depicts the subject with prejudice then those children could receive a skewed view of the world (5). This can be true of all books, but is a more prevalent issue in visual resources because images make an instant impression. Picture books, as well as other visual resources, can be used as tools to teach students to not only think, but also view critically (5).

Figure 2. American Born Chinese

From AMERICAN BORN CHINESE © 2006 by Gene Luen Yang. Reprinted by permission of First Second Books, an imprint of Henry Holt, LLC. All rights reserved.

Conclusion

As the world continues to embrace the digital age, 21st century students will continue to differ from those of past generations. Every day people are surrounded by images through advertising, videos, games, signs, logos, photography, and more. These visuals are not compartmentalized in one area of their lives, but pervasively present in all areas such as academic, work, social, and private life. People are expected to not only be familiar with a wide
variety of media for visual images, but also possess the ability to use the information available through current and future technologies.

    Thanks to ever evolving technologies, Web tools, and media, visuals have entered into every part of everyday life. Standards like those created by the AASL or the creators for the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers) are beginning to transform literacy pedagogy nationwide. If today’s workplace requires employees to be able to work with, create, manipulate, and gather meaning from a wide variety of resources, then graphic novels, picture books, political cartoons, video, and TCGs can be ideal resources in teaching transferable skills. Because of the current reliance on technology, which is heavily associated with images and text, today’s youth will be expected to be proficient in reading images and applying those skills in real world situations such as to be informed by road signs, billboards, advertising, novels, webpages, tweets, posts, blogs, and video. Educators will begin to embrace a variety of visual resources in the classroom as they attempt to prepare students for the world beyond the school.
CHAPTER 3
INTRODUCTION

Educators and professional library organizations developing standards for K-12 students highlight the role visual information plays in higher education and the work place. One of the best ways to teach children of all ages to be prepared for a digitally driven future is to put an emphasis on visual literacy skills. Through the development of standards at the national level, this is recognized as the responsibility of schools. This chapter will address three questions discussed in the literature review. Why has visual literacy been incorporated into 21st century student standards? How can visual resources enhance thinking? What can visual resources teach our students about the world?

**Visual Literacy and its Place in the 21st Century Standards**

Twenty-first century students are being groomed to inherit a technologically enhanced academic and business environment. This is not going unnoticed by professionals in the education world. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have voluntarily been adopted by forty-five states and four US territories (“In the States”), give recognition to this by emphasizing the use of visual literacy skills for students of all ages (Allyn 11). The American Association of School Librarians has also addressed the preponderance of images made available through technology by including visual and technological skills to their description of literacy (“Empowering Learners” 13).

Visual literacy is recognized by standards developers because high school graduates, college or career bound, are now expected to possess the ability to make meaning from images as well as text. Visual literacy is a skill that is an expectation of high school graduates because of its prevalence in daily life. Images are available not only in books, magazines, and on television; they are now also available on cell phones, computers, gaming devices and consoles, and tablets.
The standards K-12 students are being held to have also been adopted because they reflect the expectations of the workplace and higher education, which prepares students for professional environments.

**Visual Resources Used to Enhance Thinking**

When visual texts like graphic novels and picture books are used purposefully they can develop higher order thinking skills (Haley 4). These skills are practiced and developed when learners make connections about artistic choice and design and draw conclusions about the text based on the meaning extracted from images (4). Kindergarten through upper elementary students can draw inferences from the simplest of images and apply that inference to their present environment or one they are learning about (5). For example middle school and high school students can benefit from reading graphic novels because they require readers to comprehend the visual images and the accompanying text to make meaning (Simmons 12).

Although picture books are often seen as cute and graphic novels as picture books, both are much more than what their reputation leads people to believe (Haley 3, Carter 8). Both visual texts necessitate the ability to infer in order to draw meaning (Simmons 12). Inference is a skill often associated with higher order thinking, which is why it is interwoven throughout the CCSS.

While visual texts can introduce readers to complex concepts without having them read dense prose (Seyfried 45), resources like trading card games (TCG) teach children to strategize and prepare for what is to come by relying on image recall (Vasquez and Smith 121). Children who are successful in reading TCG symbols and images accurately at a rapid pace can prepare them to make sense of visual images in the world around them (Riddle 7). The skills acquired
through engaging in TCG can also teach students to think connectively through the association of gameplay and everyday experience (Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas 228).

**Visual Resources Used to Learn About Others**

A well rounded and successful person in the 21st century is expected to interact, collaborate, and gain knowledge from the diverse world surrounding them (Considine, Horton, and Moorman 479). Much of human interaction is easier in the classroom and out when people are aware of differences and similarities between themselves and others (Wosley 128). This understanding could be achieved through actual world interactions like travel. Because not everyone can travel and interact with the world’s diverse cultures, images can be used to visually experience a foreign land without the use of words (Gorman and Eastman, 93-94).

Students are taught in a visually saturated environment (Seyfried 46). Images can easily and effectively introduce viewers to the unimaginable (Gorman and Eastman 93-94). When images are paired with text or audio they can be used to teach students about cultural expressions and beliefs, which could benefit them when interacting with people from the represented area (Howkins 57-59). Even sensitive subjects like race, ethnicity, and gender can be easier to comprehend or grasp when images are used during instruction (Seppanen 94). Learning about people and places has never been more easily accessible, as well as valuable, to life-long learners (Melson).
WORKS CITED


