

Chapter 20

Visual Aids Supporting the Learning of Children in Our Classrooms

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Abstract The focus of this study was to find out how teachers valued visual aids within the classroom, what students or learners they felt benefit most, and what visual aids they incorporate in their teaching practices. From observation I saw examples of visual aids being used beneficially for behaviour management, for modelling tasks to be undertaken by students, and for classroom management through the implementation of a visual timetable. I also discussed visual aids with six teachers, all of whom indicated that visual aids were very important for creating interest and engaging students, although the types of learners they felt benefitted most and the type of visual aids they incorporate varied. I had initially thought that visual aids were there to assist visual learners and students with learning difficulties, but this experience opened my mind to their various benefits for many more students than I had originally thought. Students and classrooms are different and it is up to the teacher to select the most appropriate resources to maximise effectiveness. Selecting relevant visual aids can support and enhance learning opportunities for all students, not just individuals or a select group.

When I look around the classroom I can see so many different visual aids to assist the students. Alphabet and blend posters full of images beginning with that sound/blend, posters full of shapes, number charts with pictures, written words and numerals, pictures on tubs that show what the contents are (e.g., MAB blocks, counters). The room looks fantastic—bright, colourful, interesting—but also gives students places to go for visual assistance in different areas of their learning. —Journal entry, 19th September 2014, Tongala, Victoria

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Introduction

I am a mature age Bachelor of Teaching and Learning student with three school-age children of my own. Returning to study at a mature age was a decision not taken lightly; family, work, financial commitments all had to be factored in. What I do know is that as a mature age student I had something that a lot of students who attend university straight from secondary school don't have: life experience. When reflecting on how I learn and retain information from both being a primary school student all those years ago to my current life as a working/studying mother, I have realised that it is not through spoken and written word alone. Experiences, images or pictures have assisted in conveying meaning.

The focus of this study was to find out how teachers valued visual aids within the classroom, what students or learners they felt benefit most, and what visual aids they incorporate in their teaching practices. Many informal conversations were held with teachers and support staff regarding the use and benefits of visual aids.

‘Who Did I Think I Was?’—My Original Thoughts on Visual Aids

I have always had the belief that visual aids were beneficial to students, although I had not thought deeply about why. Why are visual aids beneficial? How do they help students?

When I think about my primary school years I remember lessons where visual aids were used. I remember how in one mathematics lesson we were all given a small packet of smarties. I remember sorting the smarties into their different colour groups and working out what percentage each of the colours made up. I do not remember any dialogue that was spoken, but I do remember enjoying the lesson and understanding the concept. For me, retrieving images seems to be easier than retrieving words.

If I were to select a particular type of learner that I felt would benefit more from visual aids, I would have said visual learners, EALD students, students who are non-readers, hearing impaired students, language delays and children on the spectrum. I had the view that visual aids were there to assist with visual learners and students with learning difficulties. I held this belief as I felt these types of learners would be the ones that would have the most trouble making connections to the written word and therefore would benefit most from a supporting image.

I have always thought that to ensure students have the best opportunity to learn, teachers need to deliver content in a variety of ways. Visual aids have been used in classrooms for many years—even more so now with current technology.

Research has shown that 65 % of the world's population are visual learners, or learn through seeing (University of Alabama 2005). Based on this statistic, it is likely that a large percentage of students within any classroom are visual/spatial

learners, and so would definitely benefit from the inclusion of visual aids. However, in saying this, there are other additional needs or groups of students who could benefit greatly from the incorporation of such resources.

During my practicums I have worked with students who have language delays and with children who are on the autism spectrum. It can be so challenging for teachers to try and communicate, but it is equally challenging for the students. Not being able to communicate or convey messages because you can't find or speak the words is frustrating. Having a nephew with an intellectual disability and ASD has given me an insight into the challenges families, educators and the child themselves face. It has also given me an insight into the benefits of introducing visual aids for communication and education.

I also felt that students who speak English as an additional language could make connections by having a combination of resources, including visuals. Visual aids could help scaffold learning by assisting with content, helping students progress in their achievement of English. Words are nonconcrete and retention can be difficult. Visual aids are concrete, which can then be remembered more easily.

‘Who Do I Think I Am?’—My Current Views Today

Observations have enabled me to see how visual aids or pictures can be of great assistance in many areas. In the past I thought more about the learning difficulties or challenges that could be assisted by visual aids as opposed to other areas in which they could be beneficial.

I have observed first-hand the effect visual aids can have on behaviour management. During my final practicum, I observed the incorporation of a picture of a snail that said ‘slow down’. This was implemented for a student who has a severe behaviour disorder. When the student would start to unravel, the aide would recognise this and put the picture of the snail on the table in front of the student. I found this interesting, as although this child could not identify feelings and triggers for this severe behaviour resulting in outbursts, the child did understand that the snail picture meant slow down and take a breath. This had a positive impact on behaviour, reducing the number of outbursts. This in turn directly impacted on learning by calming the student down to remain focussed and on task.

This observation started to change my thoughts of the benefits of visual aids when it comes to behaviour management. Although it was such a small, non-elaborate resource, it was one that had such a positive impact on this child. In addition to the snail, the classroom had some poster displays of positive and acceptable social behaviour. I like the idea that positive behaviour is being encouraged and reinforced as opposed to focusing on what students shouldn't do.

Watching students learn, listening to the questions they ask, and trying to understand how they think and process information is interesting. During my final practicum, over a period of three weeks I taught a short unit of work, an author study on Pamela Allen for Grade 1 students. One of the lessons required students to design

and then make their own 'potato person', like the ones in the story *The potato people* (Allen 2005). Prior to the construction phase students had many questions: 'How do we make it?' 'What do we use?' I then produced one I had my daughter make the night before. When students had the visual of the pre-made model, they seemed to process what was required much faster. There were no more questions, just excited little faces wanting to get busy creating. This observation then led me to ask the question, 'Do visual aids assist students to process information quicker?'

Classroom management can also be assisted with visual aids. Upon implementation of a visual timetable, I observed all students curiously looking at the daily schedule. I then observed some students checking it throughout the day, followed by them getting resources ready prior to commencement of the lesson. This was done without their being asked. I feel that the new interest generated also helped in individual resource organisation for some students.

I believe children, like adults, like to know what is going to be happening during their day. I know myself I feel a lot more organised and calmer if I have an idea of how the day is going to transpire. I have often had students come up to me throughout my practicums asking questions such as, 'What are we doing after recess?', 'What are we doing after lunch?', 'Do we have Art today?' Having a visual timetable enables all students to be able to see their daily schedule. This could assist students who have anxiety issues and students who like to be organised. The inclusion of visual timetables and schedules can help organisation: 'They minimise anxiety and confusion and maximise structure, security and independence' (Department of Education Training and Employment 2014).

I also feel this is keeping communication open with the students. Although it is not verbal communication, a message is still being conveyed through images in conjunction with the written word.

Teacher Views

I approached six teachers to informally discuss visual aids, the benefits, the types and students they assist. All of them indicated that visual aids within the classroom were very important. I can therefore confidently say 100 % of all teachers I conversed with highly value the incorporation of visual aids within the classroom.

The teachers believe that visual aids create interest and engage students. One believed the benefits to the students included giving them a 'go to' in the room for procedures, spelling and math strategies and that it gave the students an example of the topic being presented. This teacher believed students who benefit more were those who had trouble visualising and students with learning difficulties, such as autism, processing difficulty, Asperger's, ADHD and ADD. The resources this teacher incorporated were interactive whiteboard, videos, posters, books, words around the room, concrete models and daily routines.

A second teacher thought the benefits were catching the attention of students and manipulation aiding learning and spatial awareness, and believed that visual learners

and slower learners benefit more from visual aids. This teacher incorporates MAB, manipulative tools for counting, operations, patterning, and fractions. She also makes her own visual aids as a part of the lesson, such as place value discs for lessons on place value.

A third teacher believed that visual aids within the classroom are an important tool to maximise student engagement, the benefits to the student being that they support learning, cater for students with language difficulties (especially reading), engage students, and provide a scaffold for learning. The students or particular learners this teacher feels would benefit more from visual aids would be students with reading problems and students with short attention spans. The visual aids incorporated are pictures to accompany instructions and routines and the use of colour in worksheets to highlight important aspects for the students to focus on.

A fourth teacher felt that visual aids cater for different learners, create interest, and help with classroom organisation of lockers, materials, resources and the classroom timetable. The types of learners this teacher believed would benefit more would be students who were non-readers, who are less confident, children who like organisation, and visual learners. Visual aids used by this teacher include visual timetables, word walls, tubs/drawers with labels, charts for learning terminology or examples, and examples of children's work.

Although these teachers value visual aids, the types of learners they feel it benefits most and the type of visual aids they incorporate are varied. The teachers used many different types of visual aids when teaching, however they teach different age groups and different subjects and so that is to be expected. To me this reinforces the importance of ensuring that you select visual aids that are relevant to both the content and the group of students.

Of This Much I Am Sure

This project has really opened my mind to many of the different benefits visual aids have within the classroom. My personal view on visual aids has been strengthened. Visual aids within a classroom setting benefit many more students than what I had originally thought. Students are very diverse: All have different learning styles; all face different challenges and all are unique.

This has increased my understanding of the importance and benefits of having things visual. As teachers you can model and explain different activities, concepts or ideas; however, if you *show* the students you can create those 'ah ha' moments. Seeing students make connections and develop understandings is very rewarding.

Visual aids used constantly within classroom settings in conjunction with the spoken word can be even more advantageous. I believe this is because it appeals to more than one sense. Letting children *see* as well as *hear* and possibly *touch* provides them with a fuller experience. It is these experiences that help them learn, and then create understandings and connections. To me this gives merit to the sayings 'Seeing is believing' and 'A picture speaks a thousand words.'

Collaborating with colleagues has proved to be invaluable to me. The teachers I talked with have worked in this field for many years and have had experience working with many different types of learners. Listening to the thoughts and views on visual aids of those who have been teaching for many years has also reinforced the value of collaboration. Getting different perspectives and views from other professionals can then encourage self-reflection. It is this reflection that makes you ask yourself questions and think at a deeper level.

Conclusion

I believe that creating a learning environment for students that maximises learning opportunities includes the incorporation of visual aids. Students need a variety of resources to engage all of their senses.

All students and classrooms are different and it is up to the teacher to select the most appropriate resources to maximise effectiveness. Visual aids within the classroom have to be relevant and appropriate.

Visual aids support the development of thinking and learning skills, such as organizing and communicating ideas. Visual aids can help students make connections and encourage deeper thinking. This to me indicates that the use of visuals again supports and enhances learning opportunities for *all* students, not just individuals or a select group of students.

References

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