

Chapter 8

The Bigger Picture: Authentic Assessment and Visual Literacy: Applying a Nordic Approach to an Australian Context



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Abstract Having experienced Nordic educational practices, I wanted to investigate if the development of visual literacy skills via adopting Nordic authentic modes of assessment could be applied within an Australian educational setting to improve achievement and engagement in middle school years students arts education whilst connecting visual arts with other areas of the curriculum. Pre- and post-tests of a student following the interventions of authentic assessment indicated that students' visual literacy skills improved. Students highlighted that they felt the use of authentic assessment was a valid approach as it allowed them to engage in deeper and more productive learning. Staff from the visual arts and English faculty also commented that student skills obtained through participating in the intervention further develop student's ability to deconstruct visual texts and develop critical thinking skills in other curriculum fields, such as film studies.

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It was a sunny Saturday morning when I had taken my three-year-old nephew out to the zoo for the first time. It was an activity-packed morning, and as I began to feel the fatigue from chasing after a toddler, I knew it was time to stop, rest and re-fuel. We drove past the "golden arches" where without hesitation my three-year-old nephew pointed to the iconic red and yellow sign with such intensity and anticipation that without further discussion our lunch destination was chosen. My three-year-old nephew, a young child who has not yet developed basic literacy skills to read or string together a coherent sentence, could identify the symbolic reference of a fast food chain. Sure, of course, marketing plays a big role in imprinting images in our memories and connecting to positive connotations through colour, music, and repetition. However, if a three-year-old can "read" a symbol with minimal text through the means of looking and identifying the object in its context by its colour, shape, typeface, and connection to the landscape, this demonstrates how from a very early age we are able to construct meaning by seeing, describing, analysing, and interpreting.

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Introduction

I grew up in Adelaide, South Australia, in a household with a mother, father and two older brothers. Both of my parents were born in Macedonia, and I was raised in a manner that respected my cultural heritage. I remember from an early age, learning to speak in Macedonian and to perform culturally significant folk dances. During my early school days, my father would often speak about how different his educational experiences were in Macedonia compared to my schooling. My father taught me to never take for granted the education I was receiving.

Since growing up, I have had the opportunity to travel to many parts of the globe. In my travels, I have always taken an interest in the school systems in various parts of the world. I have been amazed by the enthusiasm students have for education in developing countries, such as Peru. However, it was a recent trip to Sweden and Norway which sparked my interest in their education system.

Who Did I Think I Was?

From an early age, I always had a keen interest in visual arts. I still clearly remember the day when I first visited the Jam Factory in Adelaide. A contemporary craft and design facility are representing independent artists/designers specialising in glass blowing, jewellery, ceramics, textiles and furniture. I was nine years old, and I didn't want that school excursion to end. Completely engrossed watching the making process of artists in their element, I felt I could identify with their passion and dedication to their medium. With English as a second language for me, I felt I could express my ideas, thoughts and feelings best through visual communication rather than verbal.

However, as I progressed through secondary school, it took me a considerable amount of time to understand the literacy demands of visual arts, although there came a time in high school when I began to learn to "read" artworks and construct knowledge from them through critical reflection. I began exploring the study of semiotics and discovered how these signs, images and texts play an important role in shaping our cultural identity and understanding. Artworks and other forms of visual information, such as advertisements, graphics and illustrations, have a purpose, underlying messages and meanings conveyed through visual imagery. Throughout my tertiary education, I have developed an understanding of how every colour, every symbol, every piece of text and different textures within an artwork all construct many layers of significant connotation.

From my experience teaching in a range of educational settings, it has become more apparent that students of today live in a digital age composed of visual images. Therefore, visual literacy is becoming increasingly important to allow students to make sense of the world (Freeman 1997). The most important conclusion from critically analysing visual imagery is a change in viewer perceptions, to "think" in different modes and express a much wider range of ideas and feelings through

multiple literacies. Working in Norway sparked my interest in focusing my research on visual literacy and authentic assessment by applying a Nordic approach to an Australian context.

Who Do I Think I Am?

Students I had the pleasure to work with in Norway presented critical thinking skills from an early age. They exercised visual literacy skills in cross-curriculum courses. They challenged knowledge and sparked my interest in researching the themes of visual literacy and authentic assessment in an Australian context.

One particular experience with a Norwegian student I will never forget underlined the high level of visual literacy skills developed and embraced in a Nordic educational system. We visited an art gallery for a class field trip in which students were encouraged to “read” the artwork they viewed in front of them. I found myself captivated by a piece of work from one of my favourite surrealist artists, Rene Magritte, who painted witty, thought-provoking images. In front of me was one of his famous pieces, a 1929 oil on canvas painting of a pipe which reads *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, which translated means “This is not a pipe”.

I asked a student: “What does this mean to you, how do you interpret this piece?” The student initially seemed confused by the image and suggested perhaps it was just an abstract. However, he was not satisfied with that response and knew there must have been some deeper meaning to this. So, he took a deep breath and looked. He proceeded to take notes of his observations and began to “see” by describing the composition, scale, colour and texture. From there he questioned and analysed his observations in order to interpret and construct meaning. Gauging his intrigue, I followed up with: “So if this is not a pipe, what is it?” The student turned to me and brilliantly responded: “It cannot be a pipe. You cannot hold it, pick it up, smoke it. This is merely a representation of a pipe.”

This was a monumental experience for me. Not just because I was incredibly proud of such a considered and well-articulated response, but the process this student took by applying his critical thinking skills to reach a conclusion. Working with students from different cultures also challenged and broadened my understand of visual communications. Constructing meaning from images can connote very different meanings depending on an individual’s cultural context, personal experiences and differences in educational systems.

I also found from my experience working offshore that visual communication is a significant universal language. Particularly evident at times where language barriers were challenging, communication was successfully engaged through the use of imagery, maps, signs, gestures and body language. It has never been clearer to me just how powerful visual language is.

Of This Much I Am Sure

My investigation focused on the themes of visual literacy and authentic assessment. Specifically, it focused on the necessity to develop visual literacy skills and adopting authentic modes of assessment in arts education. Today our education system focuses on textual literacy (digits and letters) and computer literacy but neglects sensory literacy as a core curriculum (Kennedy 2015). The aim of this investigation was to apply Nordic approaches in an Australian context and to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches to improving student achievement and engagement in middle school years in Australia. This emphasised the significance of visual literacies as a means of connecting visual arts with other areas of the curriculum.

Visual literacy refers to the use of visuals for the purpose of communication; this includes thinking, learning, constructing meaning, creative expression and aesthetic enjoyment. A visual which is visible may include man-made objects, natural objects, pictorial representations, graphic representations, symbols and non-verbal symbols (Tillmann 2012). According to Lindström (2011), the Norwegian national curriculum emphasises the necessity to develop visual literacy in arts education.

Authentic assessment includes students receiving ongoing feedback from teachers and peers (Snepvangers 2001). Through authentic assessment, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. They are also encouraged to engage in discussions, critique, self-reflection and peer assessment to improve achievement (Ramsey 2011).

To investigate the Nordic development of visual literacy, I implemented an authentic assessment mode. For example, students were assessed with a process-folio in which research and experimentation, investigations and explanation, preliminary sketches, notes and diagrams and annotations demonstrating an evolution of a working idea were assessed in addition to the resolved artwork. Furthermore, to help students develop visual literacy skills, I completed a series of carefully designed learning activities, including ones designed to build a capacity to understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create visual material (Palmer and Matthews 2015). This included “reading” the book *The Arrival* by Tan (2006), which uses only illustrations to create narrative and meaning. From this, students were asked to use their visual literacy skills in analysing the artwork and present their interpretation of the narrative.

The effects following these interventions were measured using a non-graded pre/post-unit test where students were asked to look at two different, but stylistically similar paintings and write a response to the following two questions: “What do you see and what do you think it means?” Student responses were coded as either basic, satisfactory or advanced. At the conclusion of the units, students were interviewed in regard to their perspectives on authentic modes of assessment and the visual literacy components of the unit.

Whilst I was working with relatively small sample size, I can conclude that following the interventions, students’ visual literacy skills improved. This was demonstrated by the fact that students made more advanced observations in the image response and offered more supporting evidence for their claims. This was

highlighted by the number of students who improved their rating to either satisfactory or advanced. In discussion with the class after the intervention, students revealed that at first, artworks seemed daunting and inaccessible. However, as they participated in a group discussion, critiques, ideas sharing and clarification of thinking, they found deconstructing the image was possible in revealing meaning and narrative. One student stated that they felt as if “We deconstructed that artwork until no brushstroke went unaccounted for”.

Regarding authentic assessment, following the intervention students acknowledged authentic assessment as a valid approach. Students stated they favoured this approach as it motivated them to engage in deeper and more productive learning. Students indicated they felt more engaged as they were receiving regular feedback on their progress. Students also stated they were about to further develop their ideas as they had time to plan, develop, change or refine their ideas. Pleasingly, most students acknowledged they were proud of their artwork and felt they had completed a more sophisticated piece by allowing more time for planning.

Furthermore, some students felt as if they were actively conveying a message through their work rather than just “drawing a pretty picture”. Finally, students appreciated the opportunity to actively engage in peer assessment through critique sessions developing critical thinking skills. Although at first students were hesitant to allow their work to be critiqued, most were able to see how it further enhanced their resolved piece.

I spoke with staff from the visual arts and English faculty after the study to understand any lasting effects from the study. They commented that the skills obtained through participating in the project further developed student’s ability to deconstruct visual texts and develop critical thinking skills in other curriculum fields, such as film studies. Additionally, the visual arts staff noticed in the unit’s post-intervention, students were more engaged and willing to take risks in their work, even at times going to “extraordinary lengths” to try and convey meaning through their artwork. Applying studio thinking by encouraging group discussions peer assessment and critique sessions also created a more inclusive environment engaging students of all skill sets and abilities.

In particular, the most rewarding feedback I received from the staff was the noticeable improvement in one English-as-a-second-language student. The student reported feeling more confident in expressing their vision and ideas and felt included and “part of a community”. Coming from a different cultural upbringing myself and experiencing a sense of exclusion at times in school, this story was particularly close to my heart and an unexpected pleasing outcome.

Of this much I am sure: Everything we see is an image. We see millions of images a day without really noticing: graphics, pictures and colours through visual culture, visual studies and visual communications. Visual graphics are more important than ever in re-integrating our capacity and senses in understanding visual literacies because we live it a digital age. However, it’s not until we connect our sight with cognition and memory that we understand or even remember what we see or what these images represent. This is the epitome of visual literacy, constructing meaning from images. It’s a universal language that is multi-modal and multi-disciplinary.

Conclusion

I have found that using authentic modes of assessment and specifically teaching visual literacy skills have made a positive effect in educational outcomes. Whilst I noticed an improvement in students thinking, it is equally as important that students reported increased engagement and productivity in their work through this study. Finally, it was pleasing to note the opinions of teachers in other curriculum areas reporting improvement cross-curriculum. It is my hope these students continue to be risk-takers in their artwork and broad educational experiences.

By embracing the Nordic approach to visual literacy across the curriculum, students and educators will have a greater ability to understand and construct the meaning of what we see every day. It will give us something to enhance our communication across the entire world with this truly universal language. “Art provokes people to think. Art provokes change” (Heller 2002).

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