Expanding Perspectives for Comprehending Visual Images in Multimodal Texts

To expand students' interpretive repertoires, teachers need to extend their understanding of perspectives, theories, and practices used to comprehend visual images, graphic design, and multimodal texts.

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The texts that adolescents encounter today are often multimodal, meaning they incorporate a variety of modes, including visual images, hypertext, and graphic design elements along with written text. Expanding the perspectives students use to make sense of these multimodal texts is an important part of comprehension instruction. Moving beyond the traditional cognitive strategies often incorporated in instructional frameworks for comprehending written texts (e.g., predicting, summarizing, asking questions), I present three additional perspectives for comprehending multimodal texts: (1) art theory and criticism, (2) the grammar of visual design, and (3) media literacies. In order to help middle and high school teachers expand the strategies students draw from to interpret and understand visual images and multimodal texts, I provide examples from each perspective.

Adolescents are increasingly exposed to texts that contain elaborate visual images, unusual narrative structures, complex design elements and unique formats (Goldstone, 2004; Kress, 2003). In addition, video games, websites, expository texts, magazines, textbooks, advertisements, picture books, and graphic novels require students to simultaneously process written text, visual images, and elements of design to construct meaning (Gee, 2007; Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Multimodal texts often dominate what middle and high school students read outside of school. As adolescents begin to work more frequently with these texts in school, teachers will need new instructional strategies, vocabularies, and knowledge to support comprehension processes (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

In educational contexts, it seems more progress has been made in identifying strategies required to comprehend written text than in identifying strategies to comprehend multimodal texts. Research has shown that particular cognitive strategies such as visualizing, summarizing, asking questions, and predicting are successful in supporting readers' comprehension of written texts (Block & Pressley, 2001; Sweet & Snow, 2003). In conjunction with this body of research, pedagogical frameworks for teaching cognitive strategies have been proposed (Beers, 2003; Burke, 2001; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Santman,

2005). However, the visual images contained in multi-modal texts, picture books in particular, require readers to use different strategies for constructing meaning than the aforementioned cognitive strategies.

Unsworth and Wheeler (2002) asserted that if readers are to understand how images represent and construct meaning, they need knowledge of the various visual sign systems (e.g., photography, diagrams, graphs, typography, illustrations) used in their production and interpretation. In addition, Dalton and Proctor (2008) noted that research is needed to develop a "more robust model of comprehension that reflects the dynamic nature of texts" (p. 320). As students encounter multimodal texts with greater frequency, they and their teachers will need to develop a metalanguage for discussing the aspects of multimodal texts and the strategies used to understand them (Zammit, 2007).

Multimodal Texts

Calling students' attention to the various components of multimodal texts is an important aspect of contemporary reading instruction (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Multimodal texts are more complex than texts that use written language as the primary semiotic resource (Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). These challenging texts require that readers work across multiple sign systems and use different strategies for navigating and comprehending these texts.

Written text and visual images are governed by distinct logics. That is, written text is governed by the logic of time or temporal sequence, whereas visual images are governed by spatiality, composition, and simultaneity (Kress, 2003). In addition, meaning is derived from position in the temporal sequence of written text, whereas meaning is derived from the spatial relations or grammar of visual images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Because of these differences, the cognitive strategies that focus on comprehending written texts will not be sufficient to help readers comprehend the various modes of representation incorporated in multimodal texts.

Picture books are multimodal texts that have been a stable feature of elementary classrooms for many years. However, the use of these multimodal texts has not been as frequent in middle and high school classrooms. For several years, various reading educators and researchers have recommended using contemporary, complex, and postmodern picture books with adolescent readers (Anstey, 2002; Benedict & Carlisle, 1992; Golden & Gerber, 1990; Serafini & Giorgis, 2003; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008).

Anstey and Bull (2006) asserted that contemporary or postmodern picture books provide a bridge from the text-based literacies of the traditional middle and high school classroom to the multiliteracies necessary for the future. To introduce students to the strategies necessary for comprehending multimodal texts, it is important that teachers understand how to take advantage of multimodal texts in general, and the visual images and design elements of complex picture books in particular (Serafini, 2008, 2009).

Expanding Perspectives for Comprehending Visual Images

Drawing from theories of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), art history (Gombrich, 1961), perceptual psychology (Arnheim, 1974), iconography (Panofsky, 1955), visual design (Dondis, 1973), semiotics (Chandler, 2007), visual literacies (Elkins, 2008; Messaris, 1994) and media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Heiligmann & Shields, 2005), I present three perspectives readers may use when navigating and comprehending the visual images presented in multimodal texts: (1) art theory and criticism, (2) grammar of visual design, and (3) media literacies. These perspectives provide teachers with diverse lenses through which to focus students' attention to visual aspects of the multimodal texts they encounter. In addition, I provide instructional examples from each perspective to demonstrate how teachers might use the perspectives in classrooms to expand readers' repertoire of comprehension strategies.

Art Theory and Criticism

All cultures have sign systems, or systems of meaning that determine the ways in which meaning and information is communicated and received (Geertz, 1983). Art, like literature, is a system of meaning, and we must "consider that there are facts, principles, rules, and ways of making and understanding art that are learned through an education system and/or a social

structure that determines how a culture sees and experiences the world" (Chanda, 2004, p. 86).

Art historian and critic Panofsky (1955) devised a method for analyzing the meanings in Renaissance art often referred to as iconography and iconology. Panofsky defined iconography and iconology as a "branch of the history of art that concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form" (p. 26). Other theorists defined iconography as an investigation into the content of the visual arts (Chanda, 2004) and as "image describing" that involves the investigation of certain pictorial themes (van Straten, 1994, p. 3). Mitchell (1986) summarized iconology simply as the "science of icons" (p. 1).

Panofsky (1955) detailed how his analytical method involved creating an inventory of various components of a piece of art, and then identifying conventional meanings and considering the underlying philosophical ideas and interpretations constructed within the sociocultural context of its reception. Panofsky identified three strata, or levels, of meaning: (1) preiconographic, (2) iconographic, and (3) iconological.

The first level, preiconographic, focuses on the interpretation of the primary or natural meaning and involves the identification of visual data with objects known from experience (Hasenmueller, 1978). This level also focuses on what is perceived at the denotative level (Barthes, 1977).

The second level, iconographic, focuses on the interpretation of secondary or conventional meanings, which requires viewers to move beyond the literal image to consider their experiences during the interpretive process. This level of meaning shifts the focus from the denotative level to the connotative level (Barthes, 1977).

The third level, iconological, focuses on the interpretation of the intrinsic meaning and incorporates the underlying principles and philosophical ideas

Figure 1   Noticings–Meanings–Implications Chart

What We Notice	What It Might Mean	Implications

where cultural ideologies are revealed. This level is associated with the ideological and cultural meanings of an image constructed in particular social, political, and historical contexts (Duncum, 2004).

Using Panofsky's three strata as a framework for making sense of multimodal texts, teachers may begin by calling students' attention to the visual and design elements presented in picture books or other multimodal texts, creating an inventory of what is represented, and developing a vocabulary for naming and describing these various elements. One way to do this is by introducing students to the basic elements of art and design (Dondis, 1973). Calling students' attention to the elements used to construct visual images (e.g., line, shape, pattern, texture, color) provides a focus and develops a working vocabulary for discussions about how various visual elements are perceived and eventually interpreted.

To construct an iconographic analysis of the images contained in a contemporary or postmodern picture book, students would be begin by creating an inventory of the objects, characters or actors, design features, and other images and visual elements of the book. Teachers would need to ensure that students are attending to all of the visual elements of individual images and design elements included in a multimodal text.

Developing a vocabulary for naming what is perceived is an important aspect of interpreting the meaning of visual images. Lewis (1990) explained, "When we name things, we call them into being. We permit them to enter our consciousness but only in the garb in which we have dressed them" (p. 139). Naming the visual elements of a multimodal text is an initial aspect of the comprehension process. In addition, this naming helps students and teachers develop a metalanguage for describing and interpreting multimodal texts. This metalanguage allows readers to take a more critical reading position and interrogate the structures and components that authors, illustrators, and designers use to convey meanings (Zammit, 2007).

I have introduced several versions of a "Noticings–Connections–Wonderings" (NCW) chart in various publications (Serafini, 2001, 2006; Serafini & Youngs, 2008). A revised version of this chart, "Noticings–Meanings–Implications," calls students' attention to the elements in a multimodal text (see Figure 1). The first column refers to Panofsky's first level of meaning

and asks readers to describe and classify various elements included in a visual image. The second column asks students to consider, through their experiences and knowledge, what these elements might mean. The third column asks students to consider what the visual elements might imply outside the text. Teachers can use this chart to help students move from what they notice to constructing meanings, and then to considering those meanings in the sociocultural contexts in which meanings are generated.

In addition, providing readers with a guide for analyzing visual and design elements can help draw their attention to overlooked elements. An example of a guide for examining contemporary picture books appears in Figure 2.

Moving from what is noticed in the visual images and design of a multimodal text to what these objects and elements mean and the inferences drawn to the world outside the text is an important aspect of the comprehension process (Serafini, 2003). The comprehension of visual images always begins with the perception of the visuals that artists, illustrators, and graphic designers use to render a story and communicate to readers (Arnheim, 1974; van Leeuwen, 2005). If readers don't attend to particular elements, they can't draw from them during their interpretive processes.

After particular elements have been noticed and named, teachers should ask students to consider and discuss what these elements mean at the level of the picture book itself, as well as the sociocultural context of the production and reception of the book. Rose (2001) stated that teachers need to help students consider multimodal texts at three interconnected sites of meaning making: production, the image itself, and viewing. By considering the visual and design elements of multimodal texts across these sites, teachers will expand students' interpretive repertoires to address the three strata of meanings. Teachers can use the NCW chart and the analytical guide to scaffold students' use of comprehension strategies by calling attention to the elements and making the transition from the literal meaning to ideological implications.

Grammar of Visual Design

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) devised an extensive taxonomy of the grammar and structures of visual design. Based on a structuralist orientation, they provided educators with various lenses for attending to and interpreting visual images. Drawing from their work, I present three structures, or components, of visual grammar that are essential for comprehending

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Figure 2   Guide for Analyzing Visual and Design Elements of a Contemporary Picture Book

- What can you determine about the how the book's size, format (e.g., square, horizontal, vertical), and the materials used in its construction are related to the book's content?
- What do you know about the author's and artist's previous work?
- What expectations does the cover, including the title and illustration, set up for you as you approach the book? What does the cover suggest?
- What media is used in the cover illustrations?
- What fonts are used? Where is the text located on the page? How do the text and illustration(s) connect?
- What do you think of the format of the images and their placement in the picture book? Where is the text located? Within the image? Separated by borders or white space?
- Are the illustrations spreads, single-page images, collages, overlapping images, or portraits?
- Do the series of images in the book change over the course of the book? Do they get bigger or smaller?
- Is there a relationship between form and content? How does the design of the book enhance the content's presentation?
- Select a particular illustration to consider. Ask yourself the following questions:
    - What are the dominant colors? What effect do they have on you as reader?
    - Are there any recurring patterns?
    - Are there any anomalous elements (i.e., elements that stick out or seem out of place)? Are they important to consider?
    - Are the style and artistic choices appropriate? How do they add to the book's meaning?
    - How are the illustrations framed? Are there thick borders or faded edges?
    - How is the story's setting realized in the images? Realistically? Metaphorically?

visual images and multimodal texts: (1) composition, (2) perspective, and (3) visual symbols.

Composition

How objects are organized and positioned in a visual image is called composition. The arrangement and placement of various objects determine their relative importance and how they interact with other elements in an image. Three compositional techniques that artists and graphic designers employ to call attention to particular aspects of an image are (1) the relative size of the object, (2) color and contrast, and (3) foregrounding and focus. Figure 3 provides a guide for analyzing visual structures. Teachers should consider using the guide's questions to call students' attention to the compositional elements in a visual image. These questions will help develop a common vocabulary for discussing the composition of visual images and will focus students' attention on what is available to interpret.

Perspective

How close or far away the viewer is positioned relative to the objects and participants in an image affects the viewer's relationship to these visual elements. When the characters or actors in an image are positioned closely to the viewer, readers tend to feel a strong relationship with them. In contrast, the farther away objects and participants are positioned, the less readers are able to connect to them.

Additionally, an artist may depict a particular character or object from straight on (face to face), or above or below the readers' view. When readers are positioned to look up at a character, or a character is

positioned to look up, readers tend to view the character as powerful. In contrast, when readers are positioned to look down on a character, or a character is positioned to look down, readers tend to the view the character as less powerful than a character who is looking up. Attending to how perspective is used gives readers clues to the relationship among characters and objects in a story or image, and the way the readers are being asked to consider these characters and objects.

One effective instructional strategy teachers may use to call students' attention to perspective is to find several images in contemporary picture books where characters or objects are positioned in various ways. The ensuing discussion should focus on how the various perspectives emphasize a particular relationship with different characters, as well as how readers are invited to interact with and understand these characters in different ways based on the character's positioning. Making students aware of how artists use positioning in picture books is an important concept for interpreting visual images.

Visual Symbols

Visual symbols represent ideas that are conventionalized through their use in sociocultural contexts—for example, a rose signifies love or caring, a cross signifies Christian values, and the color red signifies anger. Visual symbols are constructed in social settings and used by artists to convey meanings beyond the literal level. A motif is a recurring pattern or visual that often refers to a theme or particular meaning. Identifying and interpreting these symbols and motifs requires readers to move beyond literal or denotative

Figure 3   Guide for Analyzing Visual Structures

- What is foregrounded, and what is included in the background?
- What catches your eye first?
- What are the dominant colors? What effect do they have on you as reader?
- How is white, or negative, space used? Are the illustrations framed or full bleed? How does this position you as a viewer?
- Is the image symmetrical or does one section (top-bottom, left-right) dominate the image? How does this add to the meaning of the image?
- What is the artist trying to get you to look at through leading lines, colors, contrast, gestures, and lighting?
- How are size and scale used? What is large? Why are certain elements larger than others? How does this add to the meaning of the image?

interpretations to consider connections to the connotative levels of meaning (Barthes, 1977).

Discussing the meanings associated with various symbols and motifs that are constructed during the reading of contemporary picture books focuses readers' attention to these connotative elements. For more information on how to investigate symbols and motifs, I have described in detail how visual symbols and motifs (e.g., street lamps, red hats, bars and windows) can be investigated using the picture books of Anthony Browne and other contemporary and postmodern authors and illustrators (Serafini, 2005, 2008, 2009).

Media Literacies

The term *media literacy* is defined in various contexts as the ability to critically understand, question, and evaluate how media work and produce meaning (Chauvin, 2003) and the ability to derive pleasure from mass media and choose selectively among popular cultural icons (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999). Media literacy also involves the processes by which individuals take up cultural texts differently depending on their interests and positioning in various social and historical contexts (Messaris, 1997); and how production techniques of each medium interact with content elements to create meaning (Heiligmann & Shields, 2005).

An important aspect of media literacy is the investigation and interrogation of advertisements in mass media (Williamson, 1978). From a semiotic perspective, signs in advertisements draw from shared meanings, visual syntax, and cultural codes for conveying concepts and meanings. Understanding the underlying structures for conveying meaning is an important strategy for making sense of advertisements.

Advertising, a central component of a capitalist society, presents images of objects that consumers are supposed to desire, people whom consumers are supposed to envy, and a lifestyle that consumers are supposed to emulate (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Modern societies produce more goods than are necessary for it to function; therefore, advertising is used to produce the drive and desire to consume products that members of that society may not necessarily need or want. Advertising is used to invest commodities with value, and these values are often attached to the objects and actors included within the visual components of an advertisement. Adolescents need to be aware the underlying structures and purposes of advertisements—that is, the ways advertisements work—to critically read an advertisement and understand its effects on themselves and their actions.

According to Messaris (1997), images in advertisements play three important roles that can be demonstrated and discussed with students:

1. Elicit emotional responses by simulating the appearance of a real person and real events

2. Serve as photographic proof that something is real or actually occurred

3. Establish an implicit link between the product being sold and an abstract concept or idea, such as wealth, attractiveness, or good health.

In addition, readers are invited to interact with the images and actors in advertisements in different ways depending on whether the images and actors look at or away from the reader.

One of the primary distinctions in advertising is how the actors are positioned, where they are looking, and what they are focusing on. They may look directly at the reader, called a "demand," or they may look away from the reader or at other actors, called an "offer" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). These forms of the gaze work in different ways to call readers' attention to the components of the advertisement and the product itself.

In advertisements, positioning an actor to look directly at the viewer is a traditional attention-getting device. The viewer is forced to interact to the assumed demand made by the actor. This relates to the ways in which readers are asked to interact with others in real-world interpersonal communications. When actors turn their backs on the viewer, there is an inferred exclusion of the viewer, positioning the viewer in the role of voyeur. The viewer, in an excluded position, is being asked to consider what the actors in the advertisements are doing or looking at.

Figure 4 offers a guide for analyzing advertisements. Teachers may use the guide's questions to initiate discussions about how advertisements work and affect students as consumers. Using Rose's (2001)

Figure 4   Guide for Analyzing Advertisements

1. Consider the company who created the advertisement and its possible intentions (i.e., site of production).
   a. What company produced the ad?
   b. What does this company primarily sell?
   c. What other products does the company sell?
   d. Why do you think the company has chosen to advertise its products here?
   e. What materials and resources were used to create the ad?

2. Consider the contents of the advertisement (i.e., site of the image itself).
   a. What is your first impression?
   b. What do you notice first? What seems to stand out for you?
   c. What are the visual and textual contents of the ad?
   d. Where is the product positioned in the advertisement?
   e. What is the catch or hook for this ad? What concept of the target audience does the advertisement appeal to (e.g., fear, vanity, needs)?

3. Consider the context of the advertisement (i.e., site of reception).
   a. Who might buy (magazine), see (billboard), or care about (target audience) this advertisement?
   b. Why is the advertisement located where it is?
   c. Why are you looking at the images in this context? To get information? To make a purchase?
   d. What background knowledge might be necessary to understand the ad?
   e. How is the advertisement distributed? Target audiences or general public?

aforementioned sites of meaning making, the guide also may be used to focus students' attention on the image itself, as well as the production and reception of the advertisement.

In conclusion, media literacy is defined in numerous ways and includes a wide variety of processes and abilities. It is designed to help readers understand the connections between media forms and structures, as well as the meanings being constructed. Raising students' awareness of various media and how to interrogate these media is an important aspect of contemporary literacy education.

Implications

The realities of today's classroom and the realities of the outside world do not always align. In classrooms, monomodal texts such as classic novels and standardized test passages often dominate what adolescents are expected to read and comprehend. As literacy educators move from the traditional texts used in classrooms to the multimodal texts used beyond, they will need to be more intentional in their instruction to address the new strategies and theories that will be useful for making sense of these texts.

As images come to dominate the texts that adolescents use to communicate and make sense of their world (e.g., Internet, textbooks, instructional DVDs,

video games, magazines) readers will need to draw from a new set of strategies, vocabularies, and processes for interpreting these multimodal resources. Drawing from the perspectives of art theory and criticism, the grammar of visual grammar, and media literacies provides teachers with an alternative set of strategies and interpretive processes for expanding readers' interpretive repertoires.

Each of the aforementioned perspectives requires readers to attend to the visual content of the images and designs of multimodal texts before making the transition to interpretations and critiques of these texts. This focus on the denotative or literal levels of images and texts provides readers with a foundation for comprehension. However, stopping at the literal level of meaning inhibits readers' interpretive abilities as they analyze the connotative or figurative levels of these resources. Visual grammar, iconology, and media studies require that readers analyze texts at the site of production, image and reception, or audience (Rose, 2001). Moving beyond the literal level of meaning requires that readers infer from other texts and contexts to make sense of what they read and view (Serafini & Ladd, 2008).

To successfully demonstrate effective strategies for making sense of multimodal texts, teachers must familiarize themselves with the theories that go beyond traditional comprehension strategies. Incorporating

art, media, and semiotic theories and interpretive strategies into the classroom requires teachers to read outside the traditional boundaries of educational course work and curricula. This requires a rethinking of the traditional experiences and readings currently assigned in today's education classes at university.

Concluding Remarks

Students are constructed as readers of particular types by the reading practices available to them and the discourses that situate literacy practices (Luke & Freebody, 1997). In other words, every classroom is a site for the production of meaning, and every interpretive community has some allegiance to a particular literary tradition or perspective (Fish, 1980).

The role of progressive literacy education is to open up the interpretive spaces teachers provide through the expectations they set, the responses they endorse, the texts they select, and the strategies they demonstrate. To expand students' interpretive repertoires, teachers need to extend their own understanding of a variety of perspectives, theories, and practices used to comprehend visual images, graphic design, and multimodal texts. Each visual medium has its own language, structure, or visual syntax that needs to be understood to be understood. Art theory and criticism, the grammar of visual design, and media literacies focus the readers' attention on different aspects of multimodal texts. These perspectives also provide different analytical tools for interpreting and interrogating these texts. Moving beyond the traditional boundaries of literacy theories and practices will help expand the perspectives and strategies readers and teachers may draw on to be fully literate in today's society.

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