

1

What Is Visual Teaching?

During a rehearsal of Debussy's *La Mer*, Maestro Arturo Toscanini found himself unable to describe to the orchestra the effect he hoped to achieve from a particular passage. After a moment's thought, he took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and tossed it high into the air. The musicians, mesmerized, watched the slow, graceful descent of the silken square. Toscanini smiled with satisfaction as it finally settled on the floor. "There," he said. "Play it like that" (Fadiman, 1985).



This vignette is a perfect example of why this book is necessary. As a global community, we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. We are moving from a period in which the language of production and manufacturing dominated our way of seeing the world; now, ideas about information and communication shape our discourse. Could it be that we are actually in the midst of an even deeper change—one in which the pendulum of worldview is swinging from a more masculine and word-based culture to one that is more feminine and image based?

It is hard to ignore that the generation of children now moving through our educational system is by far the most visually stimulated generation that system has ever had to teach. Having grown up with cable television, video games, computer software that educates and entertains, and the Internet, our children are truly visual learners coming of age in an increasingly visually oriented world. Notwithstanding individual differences in intelligence and learning style, this generation of children needs to be taught the way they learn best—with visual stimulation accompanied by active learning strategies. As educators, we need to prepare our students for the world in

which they will live and work. We must allow this understanding of the visual nature of our students to influence our teaching techniques and the educational technologies we employ. We need to become visual teachers.

INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL TEACHING

Whether you are an early childhood teacher or high school chemistry teacher, visual teaching is a template for all your instructional strategies.



Since vision develops rapidly in the infant and so governs human sensory occurrence, it soon evolves into the dominant means through which children learn about their world. Our student population is made up of 65 percent visual learners, 30 percent auditory learners, and 5 percent kinesthetic learners (Mind Tools, 1998). Based on the concept that visual images are a language, visual literacy can be defined as the ability to understand and create visual messages.

Development in the area of visual literacy has focused on the growth and expansion of educational programs that stimulate students' abilities to assess and produce a visual language, as well as enhancement of students' reading and writing skills through the use of visual literacy strategies.

Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication.

—(John Debes, cofounder of the International Visual Literacy Association, 1969, 27)

Visual literacy in the classroom has become increasingly important as more and more information and entertainment is accessed through technology. Students must maintain the ability to think critically and

visually about the images presented to them in today's society. The Dale Cone of Experience model is based on the concept that learning evolves from the concrete to the abstract; visual symbols are nonverbal representations that precede verbal symbols (Sinatra, 1986). Because pictures or illustrations are analogs of experience and are only one step removed from actual events, these visual representations may be able to capture and communicate the concrete experience in various ways.

To address the effective use of visual skills in the pursuit of learning, visual learning theory has evolved into four key elements: full-spectrum visual learning, active and performance-based learning, dynamic translation, and a multidisciplinary approach.

Although we should attempt to preserve textual notions of literacy, it would be a breach of our duties as teachers for us to ignore the rhetorical power of visual displays. Visual forms of media, by themselves, and in combination with text and sound, come at our students from all directions, including television and the World Wide Web. The critical media literacy we need to teach must include evaluation of these media, lest our students fail to see, understand, and learn to harness the persuasive power of visual media.

—(Michael Day, Chair of the National Council of Teachers of English's Assembly for Computers in English (Day 1997))

Full-spectrum visual literacy is defined as the ability to understand non-linguistic communication made with visual imagery and the ability to use visual imagery to communicate. Individuals become visually literate by means of the practices of visual encoding (expressing thoughts and ideas in visual form) and visual decoding (translating the content and meaning of visual imagery).

Active and performance-based learning is an active approach to engaging the world. Photography is an ideal medium for experiencing and encountering. People must constantly be challenged to apply knowledge to new and authentic situations as they use the tool of photography to interface with the real world.



Dynamic translation is the process of expressing ideas in new forms. When people take a thought and express it as an image, or object, or text presentation, they understand that thought in a deeper sense. Real learning has occurred when individuals can express ideas not simply in the form in which they were



originally delivered, but also in new and varied forms.

The multidisciplinary approach encourages writing and connecting, clustering and creative expression, imaging and visual thinking. This approach also reflects an awareness of the dynamics of various styles and modalities of learning and experience.

Visual skills can be learned. They are not usually isolated from other sensory skills. Teachers should provide appropriate learning environments and materials to allow students to create their own visual messages. Digital literacies such as computers, audiovisual materials, and multimedia, require different skills. Competency in one literacy does not necessarily transfer to another. Because visual arts can impact student emotions and assist in comprehension, teachers should guide students through the process of learning to recognize and respond to visual and print messages of humor, irony,

and metaphor. They may also require guidance to distinguish between factual and fictional visual representations. Students' learning rates increase when teachers support a variety of learning styles. Studies have shown that processing in reading and math involves both phonological and visual information, thereby increasing reading, writing, and mathematical skills



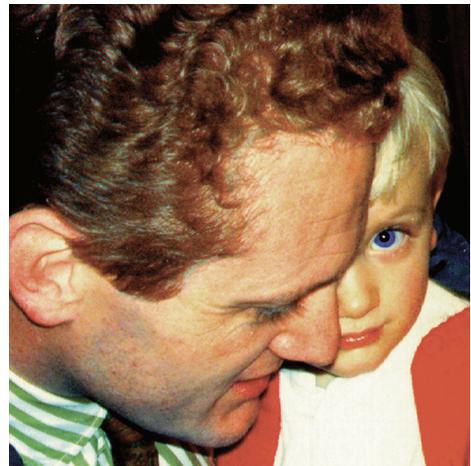
through the use of visual literacy (Stix, 1996). In a study conducted with groups of students enrolled in a mathematics methods course (a required course using pictorial journals for those teaching at the elementary level), the groups reported a better sense of task and a more focused introduction to their visual learning journal. Both groups agreed that their math anxiety decreased and their self-confidence increased as a result of the pictorial journal assignments (Stix). If visual literacy is perceived as a language, then there is a need to know how to communicate using this language, which includes being attentive to visual messages

and critically reading or viewing images as the language of the messages. Visual literacy, like language literacy, is culturally specific, although there are certainly universal symbols or visual images that are globally understood. “When words and visual elements are closely entwined, we create something new and we augment our communal intelligence . . . visual language has the potential for increasing ‘human bandwidth’—the capacity to take in, comprehend, and more efficiently synthesize large amounts of new information” (Horn, 2001).

Who Is the Visual Teacher?

The visual teacher is an educator who

- embraces and models full-spectrum visual literacy and
- understands the effects of visual stimulation on brain development and, where appropriate, utilizes imagery to enhance learning.



The visual teacher understands

- the underlying concepts of visual literacy. Imagery communicates in an emotional and prerational style that can bypass logical thought. Imagery invokes the part of our brain that assembles symbols and visual elements into stories.

The visual teacher actively encourages

- students to decode still images, such as documentary or advertising photography; and
- moving images, such as commercials, newscasts, and dramatic or comic television programs and films.

The visual teacher explores

- with students the signs and symbols in art and visual media.

6 ● Visual Impact, Visual Teaching

The visual teacher encourages

- students to encode or make more effective still images through an understanding of passive, neutral, and active imagery.

The visual teacher avoids

- passive learning experiences by bridging “seeing” and “doing” through the use of appropriate projects, activities, and technologies.

The visual teacher creates lesson plans and activities that reflect the methods of visual learning, acknowledging that when we create and utilize images we will most likely be working in one (or more) of the following modes:

- Investigate
- Chronicle
- Express
- Communicate
- Inspire
- Envision

The visual teacher responds to student image making, evaluating effectiveness based on criteria that correspond to the methods of visual learning:

- Did you discover something new (external)?
- Did you record your observation faithfully and accurately?
- Did you manifest an idea, thought, or feeling in visual form?
- Would a viewer “get” the idea, thought, or feeling you have expressed in visual form?
- Has your image changed a viewer’s mind or influenced his or her behavior?
- Did you discover something new (internal)?

The visual teacher creates assignments and activities that allow students to develop and apply their visual information handling skills by using the abilities

- to organize images for effective display;
- to establish visual criteria and arrange images in a visual database;
- to substitute images for words and establish a visual language;
- to combine images with text to share ideas more effectively;
- to integrate images with live presentations to communicate more powerfully; and
- to alter, manipulate, or transform existing images to envision something new.

THE SIX METHODS OF VISUAL LEARNING

The visual teaching template is appropriate for all subjects and grade levels. Think of these methods in comparison to a computer. The computer can be used at any level or subject, simply by varying the software. Although the lessons of visual learning may vary, the six methods of visual learning are constant. Although imagery comes in all forms and varying media, a camera is an excellent classroom tool to enhance visual awareness and increase visual learning skills. Students naturally and honestly communicate through the lens of a camera. Their world of nonwritten, non-verbal communication is funneled through a small window. Instant cameras are particularly useful for classroom activities. They provide a tangible, instant product of the students' success, and images can immediately be integrated into the lesson.

Whether we choose a camera or pen, we are probably going to use that tool to investigate, chronicle, express, communicate, inspire, or envision. Each of these methods, whether we are writing or taking photographs, has its own set of expectations and criteria for evaluation. Understanding these methods will help you think about the types of assignments you give and the best way to understand the results.

1. Investigate

Seeing through the eye of a camera's viewfinder can often help focus attention and clarify thought. Investigating assignments ask participants to use words and images to learn about and better understand the world. Clustering, listing, visual-thinking maps, and other prewriting activities are examples of explorational methods of communication. Use the camera as a tool to observe, study, identify, and learn. As a tool for investigation, photography helps us focus our attention and concentrate on detail.

2. Chronicle

Chronicling assignments freeze moments in time. Documentary imagery and descriptive writing are examples of working in the chronicle method. We judge images by how honest or accurate they are. As a tool for documentation, imagery helps us record and annotate a rapidly changing world.

3. Express

Expressive works reveal thoughts and feelings and translate the abstract to the concrete. Visual journals and stream-of-consciousness techniques are

expressive exercises. Use the camera to create a visual language and release your feelings into the world. Expressing activities help us bring our thoughts and emotions into a visual form. As a tool for expression, imagery gives us a glimpse of the world through the eyes of others.

4. Communicate

Assignments in communication are designed to share information with others. Formal elements such as structure, composition, and organization are essential when communicating. Visual reports and photojournalism are examples of methods of communication. How much information is being communicated? Is the information high quality? Is it clearly presented? As a tool for communication, imagery gives us a rich new language for sharing our ideas.

5. Inspire

Inspirational assignments use the power of communication to change behavior or attitude. Use images to influence others through the persuasive capability of photography. As a tool for inspiration, photography provides products of success and positive reinforcement.

6. Envision

Envisioning assignments encourage new connections and relationships. This communication helps establish both occupational and personal visual goals. Use the power of your imagination to envision something new. As a tool for creativity, photography puts the “image” back in “imagination.” After all, imagination is a word taken from the Latin *imaginari*, which means, “to picture mentally” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1989).

Eighteen Tips for the Visual Teacher

1. Challenge the roles of the teacher, learner, and community as creative thinkers, designers, and innovators.
2. Teach character education, problem solving, and critical thinking skills; practice cooperative learning.
3. Remember that educators are choreographers and facilitators of the learning process.

4. Remember that the tools of multimedia technology are essential elements of academic success.
5. Believe in the integration of fine arts in all subject matter and at every level.
6. Integrate brain-compatible strategies and mind-mapping techniques in your lessons and teaching strategies.
7. Be an interdisciplinary teacher and utilize differentiated instructional approaches.
8. Remember that hands-on and eyes-on experiences, resources, and networking strategies are tools of empowerment.
9. Allow your students to influence your teaching techniques and the educational technologies you employ.
10. Use visual aids such as imagery and computer presentations.
11. Anything a student can see and manipulate promotes hands-on and eyes-on teaching.
12. During reading instruction, do not isolate phonetics. Be sure to emphasize the sight approach.
13. Practice configuration during spelling instruction. For example, if you draw a line around the letters in the word "bed," you will find the line takes on the shape of an actual bed.
14. Try to avoid rote memorization. Exercise conceptual and inductive strategies.
15. Stress creativity, critical visual thinking, and exercise of the imagination, as opposed to a focus on facts alone.
16. Encourage students to sketch visual representations of what is being taught. This is not about being an artist—it is about exercising visual translation.
17. Use computers! Technology is not a fad. The best time to purchase a new computer is today!
18. Above all, keep in mind, "The future of teaching has arrived."

Subject-Specific Suggestions

Mathematics

- Color-code math problems.
- Use graph paper to arrange math problems.
- Use visual cues such as manipulatives and flashcards.

Spelling and Writing

- Outline words with colored marking pens.
- Create a visual image of the word before writing it.
- Use visual study aids rather than recitation.

Reading

- Visualize vocabulary by looking at the word, closing your eyes, then recreating it in the mind's eye.
- Look up the definition of new vocabulary words so they can be seen in a different context.
- Use graphs, flow charts, visual thinking maps, visual image mapping, and visual links.

Science and Social Studies

- Use colored pens to take notes, following this pattern: main themes = red; supporting details = blue; specific details = green.
- When introducing new material, use visual simulations such as video, computers, and role-play.

CRITICAL VISUAL THINKING



When children enter the educational system, typically they go through some standard form of screening, which generally takes twenty minutes or less for each child. The screening protocol usually looks at these areas:

- drawing and copying: hand preference, approach to task, comfort level, and fine motor skills (grip)
- remembering: visual and auditory, remembering what is seen and heard
- building with blocks: perception, fine motor skills (dexterity), and eye-hand coordination
- using language: to describe and to reason
- coordinating body movements: balancing, hopping, and skipping

Unless specific problems arise during the screening, it is assumed the child is ready to learn. After the kindergarten curriculum is covered, the child moves to the first grade and repeats this gradual yearly process until the student has completed the twelfth grade. The most critical mistake in our educational system is that we never teach the students how to learn. Instead, we only teach them what to learn. By teaching them how to learn, we help them develop critical visual thinking skills. Students come without training in those skills, while teachers tend instinctively to take the presence of those skills for granted. Yet without critical visual thinking structurally integrated into instruction, learning may be temporary and perfunctory.

Critical visual thinking is the identification and evaluation of visual evidence, thinking in pictures, creating imagery in the mind's eye, and the ability to formulate that imagery into a visual language to guide decision-making. Critical visual thinking involves logical thinking and reasoning, including skills such as comparison, classification, sequencing, cause and effect, patterning, webbing, analogies, deductive and inductive reasoning, forecasting, planning, hypothesizing, and critiquing. It involves creating something new or original. It involves the skills of flexibility, originality, fluency, elaboration, brainstorming, modification, imagery, associative thinking, attribute listing, metaphorical thinking, and forced relationships. The aim of critical visual thinking is to stimulate curiosity and promote divergence. It is divided into six psychological guidelines: lucidity, veracity, purpose, intensity, dimension, and coherence.

Guideline I. Lucidity

Students seek elaboration, examples, and illustrations of meaning. Take, for instance, the question, "What can we do about global warming?" A critical visual thinker would deem this question unclear. An explicit alternative to the question would be, "What can humans do to establish individual goals and task forces to begin an immediate implementation of the mandated steps needed in the fight against global warming?"

Guideline II. Veracity

Students question the truthfulness of the information and request paths to follow to check personally on its validity. "When it rains, the sidewalks will get wet." Critical visual thinkers would initially regard this statement to be true by using inductive reasoning. They envision the last time it rained and visualize wet sidewalks. However, the veracity guideline requires the addition of deductive reasoning. For instance,

visualize an awning built over the sidewalk since the last time it rained, or visualize two people standing side-by-side on the sidewalk, each holding a large umbrella.

Guideline III. Purpose

Students question the relevance of the information, and seek a solid connection to the question at hand. “When two laborers work the same number of hours, they should receive the same amount of pay.” A critical visual thinking would question the relevance of the hours spent working and visualize the amount of productivity between the workers.

Guideline IV. Intensity

Students magnify the information for its complexities, while continuing to examine its relevance. An example is the statement, “He’s a good guy.” A critical visual thinker would want the word “good” defined. The statement may be accurate, but it is vague. Is he a good guy because he has not broken the law? Compared to whom is he a good guy? This guideline requires a deeper probe into the information.

Guideline V. Dimension

Students begin to shift focus to alternative viewpoints. “Democrats are more productive than Republicans.” Although this statement is concise, the critical visual thinker would not find it insightful and would look at all issues in both political parties that would make the statement true or false.

Guideline VI. Coherence

Students track their thinking and create a visual flowchart ensuring that there is a definitive beginning, middle, and end. The critical visual thinker would look for sensible sequence, thereby deeming the information logical. However, any trace of ambiguity or contradictions would illustrate that the piece of information is illogical, overall.

The ideal critical visual thinker is always curious, well-informed, confident, flexible, virtuous in facing personal biases, sensible in making judgments, willing to reexamine, explicit about issues, orderly in complex matters, assiduous in seeking pertinent information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, inquisitive, and determined to seek consequences that are as accurate as the subject and the conditions of inquiry permit.

Socratic Teaching

One of the oldest and perhaps the most robust teaching methods for cultivating any form of critical thinking is known as Socratic teaching. In Socratic teaching, the focus is on questions, not answers. We lead from behind, and the truth is discovered, not delivered. As a strategy, Socratic questioning is a highly disciplined process. The Socratic teacher acts as the cogent equal of the inner critical voice that the mind and mind's eye create when the inner critical voice generates critical thinking abilities. The input from the students is like thoughts in the mind. All of the thoughts are addressed carefully and fairly. By pursuing all answers with questions, and by selecting questions that promote discussion and debate, the Socratic teacher guides the students to think in a regulated, intellectually responsible fashion, while assisting the students by asking additional questions.

The Socratic teacher ensures that

- students are in a continuous dialogue with the teacher;
- learning is constructed, not fed;
- the teacher is functioning as a facilitator or mentor, and not as a lecturer; and
- questions are answered with explanations or further questions, and not simply with “yes” or “no.”

Evidence of a Socratic teacher

- Pertinent discussions on related issues often break out.
- Debate is common.
- Peers exchange ideas.
- Student and teacher satisfaction increases.
- “Rabbit chasing” becomes an art—exploring related issues while remaining on task.
- Teachers often face questions for which they have no answers.
- Social interaction and peer acceptance in the class is generally high.
- Objectives, activities, and assessments are tied to higher-level behavioral verbs.
- All students have the opportunity to interact with the teacher and peers.
- Time in the lesson is allowed for debating.
- Socratic teachers encourage both inductive and deductive reasoning.

REINFORCING CRITICAL VISUAL THINKING SKILLS

Once critical visual thinking skills have been introduced, students must exercise them within the context of daily lessons. Through time, these skills will become habitual and will become the foundation of thought. There are three excellent methods that can be easily integrated into the existing curricula: the TPCASTT Poem Analysis Method, deBono's Six Thinking Hats, and the game of chess.

TPCASTT

TPCASTT is an acrostic for Title Paraphrase Connotation Attitude Shifts Title Theme. Using TPCASTT, any poem, regardless of length or intellectual level, can be used to guide students.

Title. Suggest that the students think about the title before reading the poem. Probe the students' opinions, and remind them that there are no incorrect answers. In E. E. Cummings's poem, "If Strangers Meet," the title may imply what will happen when two people who have never met come together. However, the word "if" could imply that there remains the possibility that these two strangers may never meet.

Paraphrase. Ask the students to translate the poem into their own words. Again, it is important the students understand there are no incorrect answers. After each student reads the paraphrased poem, each should give examples of personal experiences that relate to what is happening in the poem.

Connotation. Encourage the students to contemplate the poem for meaning beyond the literal. Although they denied having done so, songwriters John Lennon and Paul McCartney were repeatedly asked whether the title of the song "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" was an acrostic for the psychedelic drug LSD.

Attitude. How does the poet feel about the poem? Encourage students to put themselves in the shoes of the poet. What was the inspiration? Was Cummings seated at a park bench and joined by a passing stranger? Was he seated on a bus watching two strangers conversing? Did he see a man run to a taxi, only to watch it drive away?

Shifts. Help students take note of transitions in the poem. Tell them that the shifts and transitions in a poem are with purpose. In Cummings's poem, the first three lines could easily have been the opening line, yet he specifically chose to divide it into three.

Title. Have the students examine the title again, this time on an interpretive level, to examine their findings. Did their initial speculation of the title's meaning meet their expectations, or did the content of the poem alter the title's meaning for them?

Theme. Together, determine what the poet thinks about the subject. Explore the poet's mood during the inspiration and writing period. Since the poet is not present, speculation is encouraged. You may wish to instigate discussion and debate with statements such as, "I think the poet was very angry when he wrote this poem," or "I think the poet didn't intend for anyone ever to read this poem."

de Bono's Six Thinking Hats

Edward de Bono is regarded by many to be the leading expert in the field of creative thinking and the direct teaching of thinking as a skill. He introduced the concept of lateral thinking, which treats creativity as the action of information in a self-organizing information system—such as the neural systems in the brain. de Bono's "Six Thinking Hats" technique enables a person to look at significant decisions from various different perspectives. It assists in better decision making by forcing the decision maker to move outside the typical thinking pattern. It helps a person understand the full intricacy of the decision, and depicts matters and opportunities that you might otherwise have overlooked.

Each thinking hat represents a different style of thought, and each represents an excellent way to reinforce critical visual thinking. By placing six colored hats in the front of the classroom, at any given moment you can stop a lesson, discussion, or debate, and ask a student, "Based on the comment you just made, which of these hats were you wearing?" This brings thinking to a visual level. The hats are visual, tangible, and a constant marker of the critical visual thinking process.

White Hat: Knowledge. Look at the information you have and see what you might learn from it.

- Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?
- What do you know about . . . ?
- What are the facts about . . . ?
- What do you need or want to know about . . . ?
- Where might you go to find out about . . . ?

Red Hat: Evaluation of Feelings. Look at the information through intuition and emotion.

- What are your feelings now?
- Did your feelings change?

- What prejudices are present?
- What does your intuition tell you?

Black Hat: Analysis. Look at the information carefully and defensively.

- What should you be cautious about?
- What words of wisdom come from this?
- What are the consequences of . . . ?
- What were the difficulties of . . . ?
- What are the risks of . . . ?

Yellow Hat: Positives. Look at the information optimistically.

- What are the benefits of . . . ?
- What is a positive outcome of . . . ?
- Can this be made to work? Explain.
- What did you like about . . . ?

Green Hat: Creative Ideas. Look at the information with freewheeling thinking.

- What if . . . ?
- Can you create other ways to do this?
- How would you solve the problem?
- Express yourself through literature, poetry, media, and the Meisner technique (role-play and drama).

Blue Hat: Understanding. Look at the information with comprehension, confidence, and autonomy.

- Sequence your events.
- Summarize.
- Articulate your conclusion.
- Articulate your action plan
- Define the problem, and how it was solved.
- Track your thinking.

Chess

James Santorelli, associate director of the National Scholastic Chess Foundation and a chess teacher in several White Plains, New York,

schools, said, “With chess, children can practice deductive reasoning and use it in day-to-day situations. The idea with increasing the number of curricular programs is to improve children’s critical thinking skills and analytical abilities” (Merri Rosenberg, “Playing Chess as a Tool in Learning,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1992). Chess is a game of visual problem solving and taps into higher-level thinking skills. Students that often have difficulty recalling details from a passage of text typically do not experience problems with recalling chess moves. They are recalling pieces of visual representations in which particular configurations are recognized. These associate with, and often prompt, previous successful responses or pattern responses. It is a game of divergent thinking requiring students to think several moves ahead, which is an excellent method of exercising critical visual thinking skills. Chess challenges students in logic and deductive reasoning. It is also a game of socialization where students teach each other with visual decisions. They are taught how to think, and not what to think. They must constantly shift their thinking and reasoning, while being creative in their strategy.

Other benefits of chess include these:

- Chess instills in young students a sense of self-confidence and self-worth.
- Chess improves rational thinking.
- Chess increases cognitive skills.
- Chess improves communication skills and proficiency in recognizing patterns.
- Chess teaches the value of hard work and commitment.
- Chess teaches students they must be accountable for all actions and bear the consequences.

THE POWER OF VISUAL LEARNING

As teachers, we are constantly in search of that one modality we can best plug in to. Some students are auditory learners, others are tactile, and most are visual learners. Approximately 65 percent of all people are visual learners who relate most effectively to written information, notes, diagrams, and pictures (Kranzler, 1999). The challenge is to find the best approach in identifying that strength, then finding many ways to tap into it.

What are common characteristics of visual learners? Although not necessarily indicative of all visual learners, many recall specific directions after going to a location only once. They tend to like multifarious ideas

and assignments and do well on them, yet often fail at simple things. Emotionally, they can be very sensitive and often have poor listening skills, or appear to be not listening. Most visual learners like art and music and are easily distractible. They may experience difficulty with multiplication tables and spelling, yet they love crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, blocks, television, computers, and video games. This is due to the visual aids accompanied with these activities (i.e., crossword puzzles comprise letter blocks, or visual cues, commonly known as configuration). It is not uncommon for visual learning students to have difficulty completing assignments, and they can be overly sensitive to criticism. If you encounter students who are physically sensitive, and who often have heightened hearing and intense reactions to loud noises, they may be visual learners. They often have poor sense of time and appear disorganized. Their vivid imaginations can also lead to disturbing dreams.

There are lots of ideas that are easily implemented to support your visual learners. Allow them a clear view of you, their teacher, when you are speaking so they can see your body language and facial expressions. Encourage them to use color to highlight important points in text. Ask them to illustrate their ideas as a picture and use visual thinking maps. Make time for use of multimedia such as computers or videos. Create an area for them to study in a quiet place away from verbal disturbances. Understand that they will visualize information as a picture to aid their learning. Encourage making charts, graphs, and tables in their notes as study aids. Motivate them to participate actively in class, as it will keep them involved and alert. If you request that they memorize material, have them write it over and over, thereby engraving the visual image of text in their visual filing system.

Visual learning is often the strength behind the success of the student. Using photography as a tool to enhance this strength is a wonderful way to captivate and motivate these students. Photography is a universal language. Students naturally and honestly communicate with photographs. They do not know the rules—and in this case, not knowing the rules is a good thing. When you or I shoot a photo, we first check to ensure the sun is behind us and not in front of our lens. We then ask our subject to avoid standing in front of any brightly lit areas to avoid underexposure. When we have multiple subjects, we ask them to arrange themselves in a way that is cosmetically pleasing to our eye. The final request is to ask them to look at the camera, smile, and call out names of dairy products. All of this takes precedence over the language of photography. This is simply not true with students, because they do not know the rules. They take it as they see it. I believe this notion really speaks for children in general.

My youngest son, Casey, was on his way to preschool one morning. He announced, “Daddy, I want all my friends at school to know who my daddy is.” I was pleased to know that I was finally allowed to escort Mr. Independent to his classroom—that is, until he informed me he would simply take my picture. I handed him an instant camera. He snapped a single shot and promptly placed it in his shirt pocket. On the way to school, he removed the photo from his pocket, smiled, and exclaimed, “Hey, Daddy, look! My picture turned out perfect!” Upon examination, I was surprised to find a photo taken of me from the belt buckle down. Now, being the encouraging father that I am, I complimented him on a job well done. On the drive home, I thought that if I had taken that photo, I would have disposed of it and shot another one. After all, I cut off the most important feature of my subject. And yet Casey felt it was perfect. Why? When I thought about it, I realized that because he only stood as tall as my belt buckle, unless he looked up or I squatted down, everything from my belt buckle down *is* Daddy to him.

Learn to appreciate the natural honesty that comes from a student’s photographic communication. Students learn many wonderful things through the communicative exploration of imagery. As teachers, we often marvel at what students reveal when they communicate with symbols and images, even when they do not fully realize that they are communicating at all. Give a student a camera and ask him or her to take a photograph of a specific object. Technically, you have just asked that student to communicate nonverbally, without written expression. You have asked the student to communicate a collection of thoughts and translate ideas using nothing more than a photograph. Think of what you can learn from your students that you might otherwise miss—things you will not find in a permanent record, portfolio, psychoeducational battery of tests, or parent surveys.



In the fall of 1984, I was teaching a group of elementary students who had learning disabilities. One student was named James. He was a well-groomed young man, captain of his soccer team, and a leader among his peers. James appeared to have everything in the world going for him.

It was the last week of October, and Halloween was on the approaching Saturday. James was struggling to contain his holiday excitement and

became very distracted and disruptive in class. I had an all-too-necessary, private conversation with him. “James,” I began, “I always reward effort in my classroom, but first I have to see it. Work with me here and this week will become much better for us both.” Although James was not necessarily the model student for the remainder of the week, his obvious efforts were welcomed. That Friday afternoon he was on his way to the bus when I asked him to stay a moment after class. “I really appreciate all your effort this week, James. Are you trick-or-treating tomorrow?” I asked. “Yep,” James began. “I’m gonna be a vampire.” I handed him an instant camera and gave him some fun assignments as a reward for his weeklong efforts. “There are three pictures left, James. Take one and label it ‘Ugly.’ The second, label that one ‘Scary.’ And the third,” and I reflected upon my youth and all that free candy I eagerly poured onto the carpet by night’s end, “Label that third one ‘Free.’”

With Monday morning came the return of my camera and the three requested pictures labeled accordingly. The photograph labeled “Ugly” was a picture of James, no costume, no smile, and apparently a self-portrait, a bit blurred since he was merely an arm’s length away. The second, labeled “Scary,” was a photograph of his new stepfather. The third, labeled “Free,” had no candy in it at all—it was a picture of a pigeon perched on a fence post.

Until that moment, I had been under the assumption that James had everything in the world going for him, but I was wrong. You see, it is not in an eight-year-old’s nature to simply approach his teacher and say, “Mr. G., you probably noticed my mom recently got remarried. I don’t think this man likes me. He’s mean to me and makes fun of me. He doesn’t like for me to be around. But when I see how happy my mom is when she’s around him, I know that means that she doesn’t like for me to be around anymore, either.”

That is very serious information coming from an eight-year-old child. And yet those words are exactly what James said to me with three photographs. The influence of visual communication goes far beyond the borders of a mere snapshot. Some things cannot be learned in a college program or a methods course—they must be taught to us by our students. Think of what *you* will learn from *your* students.

Friends’ Gate

I had heard so many negative things concerning a new student, Jonathan, prior to his enrollment in my class that I chose not to review his records when they arrived. I felt that because he did not have to sift through my old baggage, perhaps I should not sift through his. I decided we would begin on unbiased, neutral grounds. I did choose, however, to read his medical and family background.

Jonathan was born in 1980 in Houston. After his mother abandoned him, his maternal grandmother and great-aunt raised him. Just before his eighth birthday, both women passed away and he returned to his mother. Without time to grieve his losses, Jonathan was introduced to his mother for the first time. In her absence, she had married a man with four children and given birth to four of her own. She basically announced, "I am your mother, this is your stepfather, and these are your eight brothers and sisters. We have arranged for you to be bused to another school beginning tomorrow. You will share a bedroom with your four stepbrothers."

During that school year, Jonathan had four teachers, no friends, and was labeled emotionally disturbed. This label qualified him for the program I was teaching at the time. Jonathan was unkempt in appearance, which did not seem to bother him, nor did it bother me. What did bother me was that he was extremely withdrawn, completely isolated. He had put himself into a bubble that no one was going to pop . . . except me.

One day I asked my students to select something to photograph with an instant camera. Once he had the camera in his hands, Jonathan burst through the classroom door and bee-lined to the bicycle rack. He took a photograph of the bicycle rack from the outside looking through the fence. Without saying a word, I reached in front of Jonathan, removed his photograph from the camera, and walked back to the classroom. I explained he must first draw and color his photograph before I allowed him to see it.

He drew a wonderful picture with colorful, imaginative simplicity, a yellow fence with a red bicycle behind it. I then asked him to title his new masterpiece. Without hesitation, Jonathan wrote "Friends' Gate" across the bottom of his drawing. The peculiarity of his title struck me. "Your photograph turned out perfect, Jonathan!" I began. "And your picture is every bit as nice, but I'm really excited about your title. Would you tell me something about it?" His response was a mere shrug of the shoulders. "You came up with a fabulous title without even taking the time to think it over. What does 'Friends' Gate' mean to you? I mean, why not 'Bike Rack' or 'Jonathan's Picture'? Why 'Friends' Gate'?" The second shrug of his shoulders told me that the interpretation of his title was personal to Jonathan. He realized I was suddenly penetrating his bubble and quickly pulled away.

Monday morning of the next week, I made my routine safety rounds of the school (I was the supervisor of the Safety Patrol program). On that particular morning, I was greeted by two overexcited student patrols who were upset with Jonathan. It seemed he was not complying with the school rule of retreating to the playground after getting off the bus. He was standing at the front corner of the building staring at the bike rack each day. I assured the patrols that I would personally attend to it. I felt the best approach

would be for me to find somewhere that I could stare at the bicycle rack for a few days so I could assess Jonathan's fascination.

At the bicycle rack each day I witnessed the same group of children proudly wheeling their bicycles through the gate, their door to friendship. Once inside the gate, the students would assume a casual slouch against the fence or sit sidesaddle on their bicycle seats and engage in action-packed conversations with one another. The only students allowed inside the bicycle rack were those who rode bicycles to school. This, of course, added to the mystique of the clique.

It seemed clear to me what my next move should be. That evening, I searched for a used bicycle from a neighborhood teacher supply store (garage sale). The following morning, I remarked to Jonathan about the carelessness of a student who had left his bicycle at the side of the building and asked him to make sure the bicycle found its way to the bicycle rack. This particular bicycle, however, had the annoying, recurring habit of showing up each morning, so I had to enlist Jonathan's assistance each day. After three days, he casually exchanged conversation with the bicycle clique. Although Jonathan eventually uncovered my scheme, it seemed practical for him to become the newly appointed, supervising safety patrol of the school bicycle rack. I am pleased to report that Jonathan brought his new attitude into the classroom and began participating and socializing. He even started to do normal, silly things, like poking kids in line and throwing the occasional crust of bread across the cafeteria.

To Jonathan, inside "Friends' Gate" was a feeling of belonging. For the first time since the passing of his beloved grandmother and great-aunt, Jonathan felt like he could be a part of something once again. Two months later, Jonathan's family relocated and I never saw him again, but I will never forget my experiences with him. I took the opportunity to learn from him, and I am grateful for that. I can only hope to be as good a teacher as Jonathan was.