

Making Metaphor Visible: The Common Core, Poetry, and Visual Literacy

The article argues that teachers can help students learn to read figurative language by using instruction and activities for visual literacy as a means to enhancing the reading of poetic language.

The ability to abstract meaning from figurative language is a challenging task, even for adult readers. Some of our students warm to this task and take great pleasure in unlocking the language of imagery and metaphor. Many of us became English teachers because we found this kind of thinking pleasurable and rewarding; we delight in the pleasures of exploring a metaphor with our students. Other readers, however, find that unpacking figurative language is a challenge. They are apt to regard metaphoric language as a frustratingly locked room to which only the teacher has the tightly guarded key. (Oh dear, I've slipped into figurative language, haven't I?) In spite of this, reading for inference requires a facility with figurative and connotative language. Assisting all of our students in developing this skill, while also making the task less daunting for resistant readers, is a goal that may be met by using visual literacy activities.

I suggest that we recognize that our students, and, in fact, people around the globe, live in a highly visual environment and that most of us already possess well-developed skills in the ability to read figurative language when it is presented in a visual mode. What if we brought to awareness students' already highly developed, though perhaps unconscious, ability to read visual metaphor and then helped them transfer those skills to the reading of literature? We would be helping students become not just better readers, able to read the material that will make them ready for "college and career," but better thinkers who are able to perceive similarities and dissimilarities, to find patterns and

to make connections. The strategy of providing activities that promote visual "close reading" and then providing opportunity to transfer those skills to written text may be especially useful for English language learners and struggling readers, as we help build their confidence in the ability to read both the visual and the textual world.

In thinking about this close reading of the visual, I remembered Ben, a clever and articulate student in an eleventh-grade British literature class, who complained that his friends no longer wanted to go to the movies with him and that it was my fault. Intrigued, I inquired about the nature of my latest teacherly transgression. "They say," said Ben, "that I annoy them by discussing the meaning of the lighting and colors in the costumes and props. It makes them crazy because they just want to talk about the plot and the characters. But you made me see all that and you know me, I just want to talk about it. It's all your fault because you showed us how to see all of that and now I can't NOT see it." This was, arguably, the most satisfying student complaint I had ever received.

Yet, pleased as I still am about having taught Ben the skills of visual literacy, I wonder now about whether I also taught him and his classmates about how to transfer those skills to reading literary texts. When teachers engage student confidence in discerning visual metaphor and when they make students aware of their skills, they can teach them how to transfer the reading of the visual to the reading of text. This article details some activities for facilitating that transfer.

Visual Literacy Defined

Visual literacy might be defined as the ability to read a visual image, using skills that are somewhat similar to those used to read and comprehend a printed text. The pedagogical theory behind visual literacy instruction suggests that we must help students become aware that a visual message is a construction. From the earliest grades, we teach readers that every written text, whether informational or literary, has an author and that the author has employed a variety of literary techniques to make meaning, both explicit and implicit. Less often, however, do we discuss the “author” of a visual text with our students, making clear that someone created that film, print advertising, painting, or website with an intent to communicate. Students need an awareness of the visual techniques that artists and designers employ to communicate meaning to their audiences. Furthermore, students need the ability to infer the implications of the choices made by the creator of a visual text. More practically, given how often the visual is used to encourage us to purchase a product or to adopt a political position, visual literacy may be seen as a survival skill for living in a visual culture.

At some level, all sighted people have a baseline ability to make sense of an image that comes much more naturally than learning to read text. In fact, most teachers select images to define specific words, employing the technique of visual scaffolding to provide support for their early readers and English language learners.

The term *visual literacy*, however, describes a more trained and conscious ability to comprehend what is observed. The visually literate person, like the expert reader of printed texts, has come to understand that visuals carry meaning that might not be apparent at first glance. More focused attention on the image allows the visually literate person to notice the techniques that have been used and to consider the ways that those techniques carry implied meaning. Classroom experience has shown that many students are willing and able to do this kind of “advanced looking.” Indeed, many of them know more about filmmaking, graphic novels and comics, Web design, photography, street art, and fine art than we English teachers do. By welcoming their expertise, we allow them to showcase their

knowledge while they also inviting their classmates into the skills of visual literacy. When teachers incorporate these valuable and engaging activities in their instruction, they would do well to design lessons that transparently move visual literacy skills into the realm of the close reading of literature.

In her examination of visual literacy programs in ten states in the United States, Susan Shifrin observes that “intertextual approaches to visual or media literacy . . . [are] a means of enhancing the kinds of observational, analytical, and critical thinking skills that are assumed to be fundamental to successful learning in any discipline” (108). Learning to look carefully at a visual can be the entry point into learning to look at a text: observing, analyzing, and thinking critically are parallel skills.

At its most basic, I propose that we teach students the following:

- Visuals carry meaning that might not be apparent at first glance.
- These visuals may be “close read” for metaphor and inference, allowing for a variety of interpretations.
- Once developed, inferential skills can be transferred from the close reading of a visual image to the close reading of literary texts.

Teachers, understandably anxious about standards and high-stakes testing, may feel reluctant to take class time for visual activities, especially since visual literacy skills are seldom explicitly stated in the standards. I argue, however, that engaging and challenging visual activities can lead to an enhanced ability to read figurative language, a skill that will help students become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

Poetry as the Literary Equivalent of the Visual Text

Poetry is, of all the genres, the most likely to be dense with figurative language. Figurative language allows for the compression of meaning that

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lends its power to poetry. Poetry is similar to visual communication, in that it employs metaphor and connotation to compress meaning and it is open to a great many possible interpretations. Figurative language moves beyond the literal and can be as automatic and intuitive as visual communication: “Poems communicate before they are understood and the structure operates on, or inside, the reader even as the words infiltrate the consciousness,” observes Edward Hirsch (31). In spite of some ineffective teaching that would suggest otherwise, a poem does not yield to a single interpretation, for which the teacher (or the teacher’s guide) holds the only key. Background knowledge, personal experience, and personal worldview lead each reader to his or her own interpretation. Burton Raffel suggests that “a metaphor is a frame of mind, a way of looking out from within an inner world of essentially personal thoughts and feelings. In the very act of expressing such inner worlds, the poet shares them with us” (73). Entering into the poet’s figurative language is essential to the task of learning to read for inference. Because many poems are quite short, it is practical to include these activities as mini-lessons that fit into a larger framework. Short but thought-provoking poems can allow the less able readers in a classroom to participate equally with the more skilled readers. Nancie Atwell’s *Naming the World: A Year of Poems and Lessons* demonstrates how a teacher can use a poem to organize her readers and writers into a community before they separate to do their work in the reader/writer workshop model.

Metaphoric Thinking

I suggest that combining visual literacy with the reading of poetry is a productive method for helping students enter into the craft of poetic language. In a foundational text in understanding metaphoric language, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that “our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what those lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language” (3). They provide the example of the metaphor “argument is war”: words such as “indefensible,” “attack,” “on target,”

and “strategy” indicate our cultural understanding that argument is a verbal battle that must produce winners and losers. The ability to see the concepts behind metaphoric language, brought to awareness by good lessons and good teaching, will help students become aware of the dominant metaphors of our culture. In a later book, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Lakoff and Mark Turner elaborate: “Basic conceptual metaphors are part of the common conceptual apparatus shared by members of a culture. . . . Although attention may be drawn to them, their operation in cognition is mostly automatic.” For example, “departure” corresponds to “death” (51). As linguists, Lakoff and his colleagues study patterns of verbal metaphor, particularly as they are used in poetry. Yet, the poetic and visual metaphors have parallels: an advertisement that features a photo of a meadow in springtime may carry many of the same connotations as Frost’s poetic line, “nothing gold can stay.” In both cases, the implications are read mostly unconsciously. A teacher’s role is to help students bring to awareness the meaning they have already attached to words or images.

Just as readers use the skills of phonetics, decoding, and comprehension to make meaning from a poem or a piece of prose, students employ similar skills to find the meaning in a visual text. Students will need basic instruction on the nature of visual tools and terms, such as color connotation, light and shadow, contrast, abstraction, composition, camera techniques, and fonts and graphic design. A good source for these kinds of lessons: *Seeing and Believing: How to Teach Media Literacy in the English Classroom*, by Ellen Krueger and Mary T. Christel. An even more beneficial approach would be to ask students who have skills in the visual arts to help you design and share the instruction.

Transferring Inference Skills

In *Uncommon Core: Where the Authors of the Standards Go Wrong about Instruction and How You Can Get It Right*, Michael W. Smith, Deborah Appleman, and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm differentiate between “near transfer” (learning to read a fable in order to read another fable by the same author) and “far transfer” (applying the skills of reading a fable to the task of reading an historical document). Noting that

teachers can't anticipate the reading needs of students after they leave secondary school, the authors say "encouraging far transfer has to be among our primary goals" (73). The authors go on to comment: "it's crucially important for teachers to help their students gain conscious control over their reading strategies, what's called *metacognition* in the research literature" (75; italics original). *Uncommon Core* argues against "Zombie New Criticism" (16), that is, dry, text-dependent lessons that have no connection to student interest or experience, but endorses the teaching of reading strategies and metacognitive understandings as the path to enhanced close reading skills. The method I advocate here is designed to provide students with some of those skills and understandings.

In *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, the National Research Council reports research on transfer of learning: "Knowledge that is taught in a variety of contexts is more likely to support flexible transfer than knowledge that is taught in a single context. Information can become 'context-bound' when taught with context-specific examples. When material is taught in multiple contexts, people are more likely to extract the relevant features of the concepts and develop a more flexible representation of knowledge that can be used more generally" (236). By using both the context of the visual and the context of poetry, we avoid the "context-bound" trap. This point seems vitally important; teaching students to read figurative language only in terms of poetic literature is unlikely to specifically enhance success in "college and career," except for those who aim to become creative writers. But all citizens need to read for inference in a wide variety of genres and mediums. The National Research Council also reports that "transfer can be improved by helping students become more aware of themselves as learners who actively monitor their learning strategies and resources and assess their readiness for particular tests and performances" (67). As I implied in my story about my former student Ben, I now understand that I should have been much more intentional in pointing out and naming the visual strategies we studied and in bringing to his awareness the ways those strategies could be transferred to reading literature.

Asking students to articulate the ways in which a metaphor "works," and how appropriate

they judge it to be in conveying meaning, appears to be an important aspect of metacognitive thinking. The following classroom activities have been successful in helping secondary students move toward strengthened skills in reading figurative language, whether in visual or textual modes.

Visual Literacy and Poetry Activities

Film Study

Skilled teachers ask students to do more than passively watch a filmed version of a text. They ask students to analyze casting and characterizations, for example, sometimes contrasting the same character in several productions. A more focused visual literacy activity, however, would entail using the pause button to freeze a frame to examine the visual choices made by the director. In the opening scene of the Zeffirelli version of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, ask the students why the Capulets' servants are costumed in red and yellow and the Montagues' in blue, green, and gray. Take time to examine the camera angles and the carefully arranged and colorful fruits and vegetables in the market. Remind the students that the director, art director, costume and set designers made deliberate choices; ask them to speculate about what the director means to imply by these choices. Provide the students with storyboard paper and ask them to find a freeze frame from the same film and to sketch it out with stick figures. Next to their rough drawings of the frame, have students write out the implied meaning of the visuals in that frame. Share and discuss, making explicit that although our interpretations may vary, each of us is "reading" the frame by making use of our knowledge of visual techniques and our experience of interpreting visual elements in the world outside of the film. Finally, and this seems to me to be the most important step, help the students make **the transfer** from the visual to the written: point out lines in the play and ask them to make similar kinds of inferences from the text that they were able to make with frames of the film. As a class discussion, or in small groups, have the students practice these skills first with lines that the teacher has selected and then release them to find their own examples. You may even ask them to transfer lines they are reading for inference back into sketches for a storyboard of the film they can

imagine producing. Explicitly name the tools they are using to make meaning of the visual and name the skills they are using to make inference from Shakespeare's poetic lines. Engage metacognition by encouraging students to see that they are able to make this kind of transfer between reading the visual to reading the textual.

Evoking Time and Place

Candice Mullen of Century Middle School in Thornton, Colorado, asks students to read architecture as a metaphor for poetry. She teaches her students to look at the elements of form, structure, personification, and mood in a building and then to transfer those observations to thinking about

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the poem as a place created by the poet. She provides the example of Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias" and asks the students to select words and phrases that contribute to the tone. Students use those words

to take photos of buildings in their neighborhood or browse the Internet to find structures that represent the overall tone and "place" of the poem. As the students share, she asks them to make explicit the ways that the image suggests the tone of the poem. For a follow-up activity, students may start with a poem they have selected and look for an image that matches it or select an image first and then look for a poem to relate it to. In either case, asking the students to explain their thinking helps them see that they already have the ability to read for inference.

Crayons and Character

A simple activity that can be used with any text is to provide students with the largest box of crayons available to provide many shades and, therefore, many nuances of the red crayon that they might select to represent "passion." Provide a graphic organizer that asks them to color in an oval next to a character's name and to explain why they selected this color for this character. Whether the student chooses blue or green for the narrator in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" is not important; what matters is the student's ability to connect a color with the narrator's sadness or his capacity for growth.

We return to the crayons at key points in a novel as we begin to see subtle development of characterization. Although students may select pink for Daisy Buchanan when reading the early chapters of *The Great Gatsby*, most will choose something darker when they finish reading.

Once students are comfortable with color and characterization in fiction, introduce poems and specific images. What color are the "the rotten meat" and the "heavy load" in Langston Hughes's "Harlem"? What of the specific objects named in Emily Dickinson's "Because I could Not Stop for Death"? The key, again, is to ask the students to bring to consciousness the inference they attach to the color and to connect to the inference they are making about a specific word. Using highlighters to mark up a copy of a poem has benefits, but highlighters come in a limited number of colors. Selecting among many shades of blue and then justifying the selection in terms of the text is the key to developing inference skills. (By the way, students often take issue with the names provided by the Crayola Corporation. It's useful to let them explain why a particular color has, in their opinion, been misnamed.)

Typography

Examining the implied tone of a font is another way to help students to read visuals for inference. Print advertising is a good place to begin: Would it be appropriate to use a flowing italic font, such as French Script, to advertise the Super Bowl? Why would a bold modern font, such as Arial Black, be less than appropriate for a poster for a filmed version of a Jane Austen novel? As in the colors activity, it may be useful to begin with fiction. Which fonts are appropriate for the main characters in *The Hunger Games*? Now, have students go their computers and type out a poem with different fonts for different words or images. Which fonts work best for William Blake's "The Tyger"? What of the two contrasting stanzas in Pat Mora's "Sonrisas"?

Fine Art and Abstraction

Ask students to state their impressions of fine art and then to justify those inferential reactions with details from the painting. Abstract art may be most useful in developing inferential skills. The

20th-century American painters known as the abstract expressionists created works that did not represent objects but, instead, captured “expressions” through color, line, movement, and even, in the work of Jackson Pollock, paint drips. Students can be asked to discuss the feelings evoked by an abstract painting by Mark Rothko and to explain which details suggested that impression. Then, they can select a poem from a variety provided by the teacher that evokes similar reactions. Even somewhat more representational 19th-century works by J. M. W. Turner or the French impressionists are abstracted enough to encourage students to explore visual metaphor. The works of Picasso and the cubists are useful for developing the idea of multiple perspectives. Students who are able to describe, perhaps in writing, how the painter and the poet use the tools of their crafts to imply emotion are developing a facility to read metaphorically.

PowerPoint Poem

Alex Theime, a teacher at Littleton High School in Colorado, uses technology as a means of engaging students and providing a direction for collaboration. She asks her students to work in groups and provides each group with a different stanza of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The groups are instructed to create one slide for their stanza and must discuss and agree upon the color, images, and transitions for their slide. Groups are also required to compose a one-page explanation of their choices. Faced with just a few lines of a complex poem, each group can create an image that represents the figurative language of a small section of the poem. When the entire PowerPoint slide show is shared with the class, the larger group is ready to approach the entire poem. Deliberate attention to creating the groups and providing easier or more difficult passages to particular groups allows for differentiating within this activity.


Digital Metaphors

Alex also uses Instagram to help students make sense of image and poetry. She provides a large box of objects, props, and images, but also allows students to bring in additional items. The teacher acts as cameraperson and the students create a mini-movie that shows the four or five images that

wordlessly suggest the tone and meaning of the poem they have selected or been assigned.

Implications

Visual literacy is an important *awareness* for our students, both in itself and as a means to help them develop skills in reading figurative language. Engaging and appreciating the power of metaphoric language opens the door to a less literal and more nuanced view of the world and to the richness of words and images. As students interact with messages, whether visual or textual, they learn that each form of communication has unique techniques. They become more skilled at understanding the subtleties of the author’s purpose.

Classroom experience has shown that students can become quite skilled at interpreting visual images. They enjoy the visual work and feel confident in their interpretations. When teachers explain transfer and show students that they can think about poetry in much the same way that they were able to analyze visuals, resistance is reduced and barriers are removed. Our students are quite capable of understanding figurative language. We need to assist them in making the transfer from the visual to the text. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this lesson by ReadWriteThink.org, students explore the connotations of the colors associated with the characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, applying visual literacy skills. During prereading activities, students first brainstorm other words for the color red, and then compare paint swatches to those color words. Students discuss the meaning of connotation and how word meanings can change based on circumstances. They work in groups to explore the cultural connotations of a particular color and present their findings to the class. Students then apply what they have learned to an analysis of the use of color in Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." As students read *The Great Gatsby*, they track color imagery using a color log. After they have completed their reading, students review the observations in their color logs and use the information to write an analysis of one of the major characters in the novel. <http://bit.ly/1zXczi8>

During Peer Reviews

Kaiser challenged Maggie's use of the word *Machiavellian*
as a concoction, an invention, an error.
I stepped in to confirm Maggie's word choice.
But Kaiser was able to even the score
by pointing out that Maggie had invited a *vigilante*
into her essay when she only meant to be *vigilant*.

Delaney and Emonei were arguing heatedly
about whether *preppy* and *peppy* meant the same thing.
I helped them tease out the differences.
Finally Emonei acknowledged that
yeah, she thought she got it now:
being *preppy* was like being *bougie*.

I resisted the impulse to trace that
back to the French *bourgeoisie*.
Sometimes, I think, a teacher
needs to stay out of the way.

—David Duer

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