Chapter 10
Visual Literacy and Young Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores visual literacy from theoretical and practical perspectives. Ideas of what is meant by visual literacy and why this is important are presented through a selection of studies. The impact that visual literacy may have on students’ learning and development is further elaborated. A case study from a Norwegian first-grade classroom is included to shed light on the ways in which visual work in the classroom can be implemented. In addition, exemplars of students’ written verbal and visual texts are thoroughly examined. A tendency in the material is that the illustrations are detailed and elaborate, and carry a distinct sense of the written text. Hence, the visual text may be understood as the more important text and may be vital in a child’s literacy development.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read images and communicate ideas through visual representations is ever present in our communities both inside and outside of school. Teachers and students alike experience that visual language expresses ideas differently from written verbal language (Mackenzie, 2011). One might think of visual literacy in teaching contexts as being rather new, but the term itself was coined in 1969 by Debes. In essence, visual literacy denotes using, seeing, and sensing to develop and use visual affordances in perception and communication. If visual expressions were considered equally as important as verbal expressions, classrooms around the globe might be more inclusive and supportive, particularly of young children and children with multilingual backgrounds. Today, visual literacy is dominant in the press and numerous social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. The younger generations express themselves and participate confidently in many of these environments. However, educational environments may not necessarily view social media platforms as learning opportunities. However, a more expansive inclusion of art and visual literacy across subjects may give new insights and understandings. Eisner’s (2009) reflections on what art may offer education are worth contemplating: “It serves as a reminder
that how something is taught, how curricula are organized, and how schools are designed impacts what students will learn” (p. 7). The aim of this chapter is to introduce the field of visual literacy and present first-grade students’ visual texts to inspire working with visual texts in the classroom.

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

**Visual Literacy**

In recent years, in alignment with the expansion of the internet and online resources, visual literacy has emerged as a field of research in various teaching contexts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2018; Painter, 2018). For elementary and advanced readers alike, it is of interest to note what the visual text communicates through affordances such as colors, lines, and composition (Albers, 2013; Feisner, 2006; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). In this sense, the use of visuals to construct meaning is one essential perspective of visual literacy. Also, the ability to read images is a widely accepted as integral to understanding this concept (Dresang & Koh, 2009; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). At first glance, reading visuals may seem elementary. However, when considering composition, codes, use of colors, and more, researchers have pointed out that visual literacy definitely needs to be learned (Kress, 1997). Furthermore, the nature of visuals does not follow set standards as many literary genres do. Visuals are diverse due to the array of expressions spanning from traditional art to multimodal online texts, which complicates our understanding of visuals (see also Huyn, Thomas, & To in this volume). A major concern frequently voiced is that visual literacy is given too little attention in school contexts (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) and needs to be taught (Honeyford & Boyd, 2015; Pantaleo, 2015).

The concept of **foregrounding** provides one way of working with visual literacy in education. The term originated in Gestalt theory, and it refers to the placement of figures, as well as the organization of figures, in relation to one another and in relation to the ground (figure–ground organization) (Hamlyn, 2017). Stockwell (2005) related foregrounding to an analytical tool for literature and explained it as follows: “Certain aspects of literary texts are commonly seen as being more important or salient than others” (p. 14). What stands out to the reader is often derived from certain devices in the text such as repetition and creative, detailed descriptions. In this chapter, Stockwell’s ideas are applied to visual literacy. Particularly fruitful are his ideas of foregrounding and how objects can be located “on top of, or in front of, or above or larger than the rest of the field that is then the ground” (p. 15). Investigating what elements are centered and cornered, as much as analyzing what is given the larger space on the page, enhances visual literacy. In other words, how the different elements are arranged on the page warrants attention. Furthermore, what stands out in terms of being centered or taking up the larger part of the visualization is meaningful. What is in the foreground is given more emphasis than elements placed in the background.

To understand what visual literacy entails is important in learning environments. One might say that visual literacy is twofold: first, it includes the child’s response to the images, and second, it relates to their own creation of visual texts. Responding to images by words, ideas, or emotions is crucial “to develop students’ visual literacy competence” (Pantaleo, 2015, p. 126). However, acknowledging a child’s own creation of visual texts as a naturally integrated part of learning is a different matter. Studies where this has been conducted have successfully shed light on the possibilities for deeper understanding and