

Running head: VISUAL IMAGES AS STUMULANTS IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

Visual Images as Stimulants in the age of Technology:

A Challenge of New Possibilities for the Art Teacher

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### Abstract

Art teachers have always stimulated their students visually, and art education in general has helped students be better learners through the direct language of visual communication. The onslaught of technology and media, in the lives of students within the classroom and without, provides the art teacher not with an insurmountable burden, but with an opportunity to engage this new technology. Art teachers can make new leaps in preparing a curriculum that employs technology as an instrument of organization, presentation and stimulation.

We know that children learn in different ways. Gardner's Seven Intelligences as well as other studies point to this fact; this fact has become so widely known that even Time Magazine wrote about it. James Collins wrote in that magazine (1998):

“Gardner argued against the view of intelligence as a single faculty that is accurately measured by an IQ test. Rather, he said, we have several separate intellectual capacities, each of which deserves to be called an intelligence. The seven intelligences are linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal (the ability to understand others) and intrapersonal (the ability to understand oneself). More recently, Gardner has added a "naturalist" intelligence.” (Page 94)

There are traditional/linguistic learners who can read or listen to a lecture and learn well enough; musical/auditory learners who are naturally in tune with music; and spatial/visual learners who need to see to understand, as well as others. But there is a special consideration for visual learning. Of all the ways we identify and internalize information, visual mechanisms can be very effective, at the very least, in supplementing other mechanisms, if not surpass them in effectiveness. As the old adage goes, “One picture is worth a thousand words.” Freeman, Robertson and Outhred (199) write of a study conducted on seven-year-old children:

“Compared with their matched controls, students who received explicit instruction in visual imagery three times per week over a period of four weeks, significantly outperformed their counterparts on the Byrne-Fielding-Barnsley test of listening comprehension and on standardized Neale Test of Reading Comprehension.” (Page 251)

How do visual images and the participation in visual activity broaden student learning? And why should art educators keep playing the vital role that they play in engaging their students visually?

In our day teachers have to compete with the high level of stimulus that children receive from television, action-packed movies, video games and the Internet. Daily, teachers find that students have very flighty attention spans, so visual stimulation becomes crucial in getting a child's attention. When a child is shown a picture, their attention is automatically captured. Whether their attention is retained or not is another matter. But once their attention is captured, the teacher has an opportunity to really get the message across. Marshall Jones (1998, page 205) explains that "creating rich, exploratory interactive environments, while difficult, is not impossible. The singularly difficult task is building an environment that is truly engaging."

Art is one subject that has always been underrated, if not sometimes disregarded, in terms of the contributions it has made towards engagement of students. The engaging aspect of art has been long standing before the advent of technology and visual stimulation into our lives. Not only does art engage its participants in the social, political, psychological, historical, emotional, personal, aesthetic, mathematical and scientific aspects of the subject that it is being discussed; It does so with direct connection with the viewer. The fact that art has long engaged all content areas long before the widespread discussion of cross-curricular instruction in the annals of education is the basis for another discussion. But the fact that art does this using the most effective and direct language, i.e. visual communication, is a very significant concept. Simply and by its very nature, art education accomplishes two very significant things: First, it engages many aspects of the life of the student-participant, thereby touching many cross-curricular areas; second, it does so directly and successfully using visual communication. The engagement it offers is hard to surpass. Jones (1998 page 205) defines engagement as "the nexus of intrinsic knowledge and or interest and external stimuli that promote the initial interest in, and continued use of a computer-based learning environment." While in his paper Jones was discussing the

creation and use of computer game-like environments that engage the participant in an educational activity, his explanation in a broad sense also gives a clear understanding of the significance of visual stimulation and engagement in general. This seems very beneficial in understanding art education and its importance as a factor of communicating various educational concepts through the viewing of and making of visual images.

The use of technology as a tool for art educators does not automatically make teaching art more effective, but it does provide the art teacher with a more efficient way of storing, retrieving and presenting images as stimulants and supplements to instruction. Teachers are finding that the internet is a source of information for their instruction, serving a variety of instructional purposes. “Lesson plans are the most sought instructional resource on the Internet ... Although most respondents use the Internet for instructional planning, they often consult several resources (print, electronic, human) and use or adapt information they find to meet their specific instructional needs.” (Small, page 412). As the internet becomes more and more a daily tool for teachers’ planning, along with other sources, it becomes especially significant for art teachers, who have long struggled to deal with the large quantity of material that they deal with on a daily basis, and have to evaluate and update almost continually. This includes images of historical significance in art, examples of artworks that help students understand art-making concepts, as well as demonstrations of art processes. These materials that art teachers use on a daily basis include posters, other print visual aids and charts, slide collections of images, film strip collections of images, overhead collections of images, video historical documentaries, video process demonstrations, flash cards, past examples of student work and examples of a work in progress that show various steps of completion, just to name a few. The quantity of these

materials is difficult to manage, especially when their physical quantity, and sometimes size, is exacerbated when a teacher is obligated to teach multiple subjects and groups in the same day.

It may seem a daunting task, but art teachers should feel proud of their responsibility and mission. Some feel that the advent of the internet is just another piece of media to throw on the heap of tools that an art teacher has to deal with. But if computers and the Internet, especially in their ever-more efficient speed and capability, were viewed as the long-awaited consolidator of much of the media with which art teachers have had to deal, then it would not seem such a daunting task. If used correctly, the internet and computers can help teachers and students learn from images, and help them be engaged with images in our high-tech world, just as they always had since the fine art studio schools of the past. Ancient Greek and Medieval Arab scientists, as well as Leonardo Da Vinci and other renaissance artists, created their own set of learning aids as they explored the boundaries and uncharted areas of the physical world and its scientific possibilities. Da Vinci created highly detailed drawings of plants, animal and human cadavers as he explored their variety as well as their building blocks. He made visual drawings of his ideas concerning new and innovative ways that human beings can operate in their daily lives, including transportation on land and in the air. The Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century was a time of social and technological upheaval. We are now living in a similar time. Art teachers should welcome the advent of high technology as a time to advance forward in the ways of instruction and delivery of message. Art teachers, as in the past, have the opportunity to be at the forefront of stimulating education, and what better way to do it than with pictures.

## References

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