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Visual literacies and multiliteracies: an ecology arts-based pedagogical model

By Susan M. Holloway

How we read the natural world was a focus of this Canadian research study. Students taking photographs of their environment opened up a whole range of opportunities for learning, with evident potential for application of this model beyond school settings.



Introduction

This case study explored the kinds of visual literacies and multiliteracies learners experience utilizing photography to read the natural world around them. Falihi and Wason-Ellam (2009) note that ‘... visual literacy, the ability to create, read, and respond to visual images has become an essential concept in a global society’ (p. 410). Visual literacy provides the opportunity to make meaning from imagery with similar levels of complexities as in spoken language. As with any interpretation, visual literacy needs to be understood as socially constructed. Learners’ perceptions are always shaped by the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewing, making, and interpreting visual literacies.

An equitable framework

This case study employed many of the principles of a multiliteracies theoretical framework. Multiliteracies is a term coined by the New London Group (1996) to expand the narrow definition of literacy beyond the ability to read and write. They argue to consider the role of linguistic and cultural diversity, which challenges the notion of a standard norm for any language; and to explore the implications of technology, media, and multimodalities as part of what constitutes literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

The New London Group believes that literacy attainment is imperative to equity. The ecology arts-based model used in this study does not necessarily ask students explicit questions to decode how they are positioned in relation to society. Nor does it ask them to go beyond their personal experiences to critique the role of larger institutional forces in shaping epistemologies and producing systemic discrimination. Nevertheless, the kinds of critical thinking students engage in, and their ability to express themselves through visual literacies is creative and political in its own way. In thinking about ‘language as a form of social action’ (Lesley, 2008, p. 177), and visual literacy as a kind of language, then the act of photographing, editing, and

critiquing their own photos, as well as embedding that artistry within the larger community, can be seen as important steps in critical awareness.

A multi-disciplinary approach

In practice, this ecology arts-based model, designed and implemented by a social worker, in consultation with teachers and community partners, uses digital photography lessons and photography field trips as tools for enriching curriculum-based learning in science and technology, visual arts, mathematics, and Language Arts. Examples of interdisciplinary uses of this model are: mathematics used to calculate depth of field, understand fractions and figures related to shutter speed and aperture, to document and look for geometry in nature; science used to investigate, observe, and document natural features in their local ecosystems; art used to interpret and enhance the photography; and Language Arts used to journal about experiences and observations.

As Seglem and Witte (2009) comment:

Helping students to understand the diversity of print and non-print texts as well as the visual connections that can be made between them is a practical way to connect the concrete and abstract thinking of students who struggle to make meaning from text. (p. 217)

Visual literacy and multimodalities give all students a wider breadth of means and content to develop their own cross-curricular skill sets.

Ecology arts-based model

This ecology arts-based model was implemented in a public school located in a small city within South Western Ontario, Canada. There were five participants interviewed in this case study consisting of teachers, community partners, and the coordinator. While the pilots involved solely school

children, this model could just be applied to educational contexts for older youth and adult lifelong learners.

Other key elements of this model are the involvement of professional community partners such as photographers, farmers and entomologists, as well as bridging between school and the wider community. For example, one class had an art showing in a photographer's professional studio; other classes had one of the partners accompany them on a field trip to share their professional knowledge.

The use of photography in this ecology arts-based pedagogical model provided many opportunities for the teachers to utilize visual literacy with their students. Yenawine (1997) states:

Visual literacy is the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification—naming what one sees—to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. (p. 845)

All of the participants remarked on the students' photography as a sophisticated way of observing, documenting, and expressing their views on the natural world. For example, the organic farmer stated, 'I was impressed by how much they observed... And how they were able to look at something from a totally different angle, sometimes literally.' Brill, Kim, and Branch (2007) contend that, 'visual messages are fundamental to complex mental processing because they provide information and opportunities for analysis that text alone cannot provide' (p. 51).

Students were given a simple introduction in lay terms, to the basics of line, shape, form, space, texture, tone and colour, which gave them a metalanguage for their photography. On the field trips, the only instruction learners were given was to use these elements of design to guide their photography. Through critiquing their own work and each other's in a positive way, they built metacognitive and social skills.

All participants commented on the benefits of cross-curricular pedagogy. Teacher 1 used students' photography to write a creative piece in which they had to imagine themselves as the old bicycle they had seen on the pathway and speak in the bicycle's *voice*, answering the question: How did you end up in this predicament? He also used the old farm equipment as a way into talking about local history. Teacher 2 incorporated students' photos of bugs



into a science unit entitled Diversity of Living Things. The photographer spoke about the potential to discuss photography's technical mathematical side: 'What if we had to change the depth of field? What if we want to make that look blurry in the background?' Students were challenged to synthesize their learning in various disciplines.

English language learners

A multiliteracies framework tailored the curriculum to better serve English Language Learners (ELLs). Teacher 2 commented: '... you don't need to have a strong command [of English] to go out and take photographs and express yourself.' Teacher 1 observed that using one of their own photos acted as an important scaffold for learners to start writing their narratives. It meant they were not starting with a blank page. Several participants saw a connection between story telling and the art of photography. Teacher 2 stated: 'I think students were creating stories in their photography. Some kids were drawn to movement or drawn to things that were still.'

Creating and analyzing photography may augment students' abilities to imagine. Visuals can generate writing and vice versa. Several participants discussed the globalizing element of photography as visual literacy. As the photographer pointed out, 'We could take a book of photography across the world—we can all read that photograph—it doesn't matter if a Polish person took that photograph or an African person took that photograph. Visual language is universal.'

Questioning discourses

Multiliteracies critique systemic disparities in wealth, analyze how discourses shape our belief systems, and

examine ways to creatively challenge hegemony. The photographer emphasized that she did not evaluate the learners' photography. Instead, she asked questions such as: 'What made you want to shoot it from this angle?' or 'What does it feel like to look at these photos?' As well, the photographer would model professional editing techniques, for instance: 'This is really good straight off the camera, but watch how when I darken the photos, see how the colours come out more.'

Many consumers accept art or media production in its polished state without considering the many metamorphoses it might have undergone while being created. Learners are forced to reflect on the numerous choices they have to make when they themselves are in charge of the art or media production. This process compels learners to question why and how it is that certain discourses tend to circulate widely and construct commonly held views more so than others, and to ask which discourses have shaped their process of production. They become aware of how the frame they choose inevitably privileges certain discourses, while to some extent marginalizing others.

Multiliteracies help ensure that students' personal and cultural resources, contextualized in their local, socially situated domains, get taken into account when designing curriculum. For example, Teacher 1 illustrated how access to digital technology is an equity issue, whereby some students are hard pressed to participate: 'Some of my kids definitely can't afford it [a memory card for the camera]. Even ten dollars, that's a hardship.'

One premise of this model is that we cannot expect learners to be concerned environmentalists when they have limited contact with the natural world outside of urban environments. The organic farmer echoed similar concerns when she stated, 'We are so disconnected to where food comes from, and we are so disconnected from the natural world.'

The photographer said, 'The camera gets the kids to slow down and really take notice. And that intimate experience of looking more closely at something is what connects you to the wonder of that thing, and I think that can create a respect for, and a love for, the natural environment. I think that is what we need in order to get this generation to actually take responsibility to look after and to care for the natural environment because obligation isn't enough of a motivation.' Somewhat ironically, technology and the power of visual literacies may help to innovatively



reconnect learners of all ages with what the outdoors has to offer.

Creating stories, constructing identities

For struggling writers, reading and writing often feel like a series of obstacles based on grammatical hurdles, instead of feeling the excitement of ideas that come out of narratives. Photography acts as a medium to introduce the excitement of creating stories. Literacy, whether cursive, printed, audio, or pictorial, ultimately is about how ideas are shaped in meaningful ways. The teachers felt this model allowed students to emotionally and intellectually make connections through art about their local environment. Seglem and Witte (2009) observe:

By teaching students how to critically read and view all texts, not just the traditional print texts, teachers can build upon the skills needed to read and write, increasing students' literacy levels in all areas.

Enabling students to increase their levels of literacy increases their abilities to socially construct their identities in more powerful ways. Falihi and Wason-Ellam (2009) note it 'helps learners transform themselves from objects to subjects, from being passive to being active, from recipient to participant, and from consumer to producer' (p. 415). The emotional element of feeling successful with literacy should not be underestimated.

Visual literacies for ELL students

Digital literacies are only going to increase in demand, and it is people who have historically been marginalized in our society and are more vulnerable who will suffer most as the disparity in literacy levels increases. Digital photography and a critical engagement with visual literacy as a language in, and of itself, may open doors for those students who

are working in several languages. As Cummins (2007) points out, ELL students are always trying to catch up to a moving target in the sense that an ELL student's peers are also moving ahead in their learning, without the extra challenge of trying to mediate new knowledge and skills through an additional language.

It may also help students to attain what Pegrum (2008) refers to as intercultural competence, which 'de-emphasises the acquisition of a native-like identity and encourages the learner to carve out a *third place* (Kramsch, 1993) from which he or she will be able to negotiate and mediate between the native and target cultures' (Pegrum, p. 137–38). By using visual literacy as an integral part of pedagogical practices, all learners are more likely to engage.

Conclusion

Citizenry, for youths as well as adults, involves questioning what is equitable and just. Giving learners opportunities to express their views and feelings on the environment through the kind of artistic expression that visual literacies and multiliteracies afford opens up possibilities for them to feel more stake in their claim on their local environments. Multiliteracies deepen learners' thinking about ecology and multimodalities contextualized in relation to their own lives and societies. Being a citizen in large part is just this—critically and emotionally engaging in the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs that construct the community, and feeling able to take action and to have a say in how the community will continue to be shaped.

Creativity is a key antidote to hegemony. Engagement with multiliteracies ultimately strives for the ability to imagine a better world, an alternative to how systems of oppression currently operate, and an illumination that reconceptualises current ways of being. The New London Group calls for civic pluralism, which argues for citizens of diverse backgrounds to find meaningful ways to engage with one another and proposes that people need to 'have the chance to expand their cultural and linguistic repertoires so that they can access a broader range of cultural and institutional resources' (1996, p. 15). This ecology arts-based pedagogical model gives a concrete means of thinking through how to implement the tenets of a multiliteracies framework.

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