Visual Literacy: An Emerging Concept

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"VISUAL literacy . . . oh yes, that is the program in which kids learn how to take pictures" . . . or . . . "We thought about putting visual literacy in our curriculum, but we didn't have funds enough for 16mm cameras and film."

These are just two fairly typical comments educators have made concerning visual literacy. It is apparent that many educators, both in the public schools and in institutions of higher learning, have either hazy ideas or just plain misconceptions regarding this new and emerging concept.

What then is visual literacy? Certain educators desire to implement visually oriented programs to foster the development of visually literate individuals. Visual literacy is currently fulfilling a variety of roles in the curriculum, having lasting impact on children.

Visual literacy as a concept began in 1966 with the thinking of John L. Debes. Perhaps more than any other single individual, he has given direction and encouragement to this multidisciplinary concept. In 1968 Debes discussed some of the psychological, educational, and societal foundations supporting the visual literacy concept.[1] In describing the role of visual literacy, he has expressed four general types of learning experiences which contribute to the development of visually literate individuals:

- The nature of the learning experience should provide practice for the learner in selecting from his environment particular visual phenomena of importance to him.
- The nature of the learning experience should permit the learner, once he has seen a thing, to do something in such a way that there transpires a meaningful interaction between him and whatever he sees.
- The nature of the learning experience should be contrived in order that opportunities exist for the learner to create meaningful visual statements.
- The nature of the learning experience should necessitate a reason for the learner to have practice in arranging his ideas visually.

Although these learning experiences define in a sense visual literacy, a somewhat more direct definition might be the one developed by the 1969 National Conference on Visual Literacy:

> 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 visible actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in the environment. Through creative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the master works of visual communication.

[1] J. L. Debes. "Some Foundations for Visual Literacy." *Audiovisual Instruction* 13: 961-64; 1968.

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A less sophisticated and somewhat more school-oriented definition might be:

> Visual literacy programs consist of those multidisciplinary activities which provide the learner with direct opportunities to develop skills in becoming an interpretive, creative sender and intelligent receiver of his visual and verbal environment.

Using Visual Experience

Why, some may ask, should we be concerned with implementing visual literacy programs? Are there not enough TV, film, and other visual media in our schools? The answer lies not in the quantity of visual materials available, but with the emphasis and place they occupy in the curriculum. Young children come to the school experience with a background of some 4,000 to 6,000 hours of TV, an experience in almost total passiveness. They are children of a visual world, yet they are being shaped by their environment without having any control other than the volume level. Young children who come from our society with electronically equipped homes tend to have limited visual-motor experiences.

The child leaves a home where he has grown accustomed to a highly visual and electronic environment. He is able to change the visual stimulation to which he passively responds at the flip of a switch. Learning, as he comes to know it, is not a result of interacting with his environment, but becomes an absorption process. The child comes to school, then, with an awareness and acceptance of his visual environment and is perhaps ready for direct visual learning experiences of the nature which Debes has described. Instead, he enters a school environment filled with ditto sheets, crayons, scissors, paper, glue, and reading, reading, reading, reading. Reward comes in the form of an opportunity to see reruns of *The Electric Company* and *Sesame Street.*

A cursory examination of almost any school curriculum will lead one to the realization that learning experiences directed at providing opportunities for the child to become an interpretive, creative sender and intelligent receiver of his subjective and objective environment are lacking. There is, then, a need at the preservice and in-service levels to help teachers develop an ability to contrive direct visual learning experiences.

Concomitantly, there exists a need for programs and materials which can assist teachers in contriving direct visual learning experiences. These programs and materials should be of such nature that the learning experiences are associated with concrete objects and personal and emotional involvement which result in an interactive process with other individuals.

The concept of visual literacy is such that it enables program developers to operationalize it in many forms. It is not a program that is implemented at a specific grade level for a specific period of time. There is no closure to visual literacy. Visual literacy is that growing awareness on the part of teachers and pupils of greater alternative responses to a constantly changing visual world. It appears as if at every point in the curriculum where the teaching of verbal skills is justified, corresponding visual skills can also be justified.

A Second Phase

In many respects, implementation programs in visual literacy are entering a second phase. Research-oriented projects in the late sixties which involved limited numbers of children are now being followed by more tightly designed programs and implementation involving several hundred or even thousands of students. The following is not meant to be an inclusive listing of current visual literacy programs, but only an indication as to the variety and growth of this new field.

Stimulating and fostering this growth is a clearinghouse and information source regarding current activities at the Center of Visual Literacy, University of Rochester. The center is responsible for creating interest in and expanding the conceptual horizons of this multidisciplinary field.

The Learning Resource Center at Red Oak, Iowa, is one of several centers which are developing materials. This center is cur-

rently piloting mass communications packages in 25 Midwestern high schools. The Buffalo, New York, project entitled "Early Push" is involving some 2,000 preschool children. The goal of this program is to improve each child's self-concept and increase his environmental awareness. A visual literacy program in San Diego, California, is aimed at improving the speaking and reading abilities of 1,800 primary bilingual children. The entire system of Milford, Ohio, K-12, has implemented a program to improve verbal and visual literacy as well as visual eloquence.

Institutions of higher learning, such as Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania, and the Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York, have specific programs to improve total literacy. At the state education level there is a growing recognition of visual literacy. The State Education Departments of New York, Vermont, Wyoming, Idaho, and others are now officially accepting this new field as a valid means to conventional educational goals or as a valued goal in itself.[2]

Various reasons or rationales are given to support visual literacy programs. Some educators are placing cameras in the hands of young children primarily to develop self-concept, whereas others see components of a visual literacy program as a means to further verbal skills. As our sophistication in design and development increases, more programs will exist which combine the goals of earlier work. These goals of increased verbal skills, self-confidence, self-awareness, and environmental awareness will become processes in the development of a completely literate individual.

As children, teachers, media specialists, psychologists, linguists, researchers, and philosophers continue to explore the realm of visual literacy, the artificial divisions between our visual and verbal worlds will continue to become less obvious. In this visual/verbal world there is no room for competition. Continued exploration of this concept will reveal the reality of the existing unification of these two means of expression. □

[2] Letter from J. L. Debes, Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, New York, January 15, 1973.