

If I Were a Camera: Some Possibilities for Visual Arts in a Reading Classroom

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Introduction

Beginning my professional practice as a first year developmental reading teacher at J.E.B. Stuart High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, I endeavored to construct a student-centered environment where individuals are directed towards the acquisition of academically and personally beneficial literacy skills. Stuart is one of the most ethnically and economically diverse schools in the country. My students have demonstrated an extensive need for instructional intervention. To this end, my school has undertaken a far-reaching and unequivocal effort to improve the comprehensive reading abilities of its students. My role in this effort is challenging in scope and invigorating in nature. I am attempting to integrate planned, purposeful and conscious strategies into the reading repertoires of my developing readers in hope of manifesting "the goal of deeper, more elaborated learning" (Pintrich & Johnson, 1990, p. 86).

Through early self-assessment measures my students reported a view of reading which can be described as a dictatorial and externally imposed activity. My students felt they gained little from reading in terms of information, pleasure, or interest. They seemed to have missed the power of reading as a joyful, compelling and personally fulfilling activity. Consequently, my students tread academic waters laced with dissonance; they manage to find equilibrium far beneath their potential. Can I bring the joys of reading into the lives of my students? I want to infiltrate this dissonance and close the gap between current achievement levels and potential achievement levels.

This Teacher's Consciousness

Why are we reading if not in hope of beauty laid bare,
life heightened and its deepest mysteries probed?
Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days,
will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage and the possibility of meaningfulness...
What do we ever know that is higher than the power which, from time to time seizes our lives,
and reveals us startling to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered?

-Annie Dillard
Three from Dillard

Students must be motivated if they are to experience the trust needed to optimize their own academic potential and assume a position of consistent active agency. If my students are to claim their voice they must learn to trust their abilities, however they have good reason to be circumspect of their reading skills.

Their encounters with texts have a perfunctory quality. Developing proficiencies include organizing, sequencing, summarizing, interpreting and synthesizing textual information, re-reading, choosing main ideas, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and comprehension monitoring. Thus there is the compelling need to improve these proficiencies if they are to develop self-reliance, self-efficacy and self-trust. Ultimately, the emergence of reading self-reliance is dependent on motivation and engagement. My challenge involves maximizing and amplifying the sporadic motivation displayed by my students.

Always and forever and as far as my memory travels in retrogressive motions, I have personalized my reading, both aesthetic and efferent, with annotations. As I tangle with the event of a poem I make the delicious and pleasurable knots of entanglement visible with my own markings on the page: phrases, single adjectives and sanguine exclamation points. Looking over the various books and articles that present the philosophy of literary critic Louise Rosenblatt, I notice my own annotations as a conglomeration of giggly stars drawn around her most poignant statements. She writes in *The Poem as Event*,

The poem is what the reader, under the guidance of the texts, crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, image, thought, and feeling which he/she brings to it. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he/she marshals his/her resources, and from them brings forth the new order, the new experience, which he/she sees as a poem (Rosenblatt, 1964, p. 126).

Seamus Heaney describes the belief in the transcendent in his poem *The Cure at Troy*. He writes of the “utter self-revealing double-take of feeling” which can seep into one’s sense of one’s self. This “utter self-revealing double-take of feeling” courses through me when I go about deciphering those deceptively deflated-looking marks on a page. Rosenblatt examines this indefinable “magnetism” and limitlessly soulful experience of transacting with text-as-poem. Gratefully I note that she does not dissect away the magic of the poem but rather, and with subtle grace and emphatic eloquence, illuminates reading as an essential phenomenological transparency directed by artistic form, method and even intention. In *You Gotta BE the Book*, Wilhelm offers additional evocation of Rosenblatt’s theory of transaction:

As a part of her argument she makes an interesting move away from the view that ‘reading is reading’ by drawing a distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading. Efferent reading is pursued when a reader adopts a stance in which he is concerned with what information they can ‘take away’ from reading. The text is treated as consisting of information. The aesthetic stance, however, is maintained for the purpose of ‘living through’ an experience that is enjoyed while reading. Texts themselves are not intrinsically literary or nonliterary; the stance taken toward a text is

what makes the reading aesthetic or efferent (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 20).

I respond intimately to the idea of aesthetic reading. It is a style or stance that I have always intuitively assumed and the term aesthetic offers validation and affirmation for a stance that is an orientation of my character. As an educator, how do I care about people who don't intuitively read aesthetically or are, in short, quite different from myself?

Rosenblatt selects a reverential voice as she explicates her critical stance within the framework of a reader's personal experience. The reader's personal experience with the text or poem is informed by his present interests and preoccupations. Rosenblatt argues that a reader must be guided by the poem if he/she is to cultivate a dynamic capacity to generate "sensitive and sound literary experiences and interpretations" (Rosenblatt, 1964, p. 125). While Rosenblatt's argument may itself be misunderstood, it is imperative that a reader thoughtfully listen to Rosenblatt's theory in order to recognize Rosenblatt's rejection of an interpretive free-for-all. Her theory of transactional reading does not promulgate shoddy interpretive moves. She rejects "irresponsible or careless interpretations and authoritarian stances. Antonio Skarmeta's protagonist in his effecting novel *Il Postino* intuitively understands Rosenblatt as evidenced in his accusatory exclamation, "It's just that you don't read the words – you swallow them. You have to savor words. You have to let them melt in your mouth" (Rosenblatt, 1964, p. 74). Ultimately, aesthetic reading is an open invitation to chaos, but chaos of a particular dimension. Wallace Stevens identifies this dimension as "the law of chaos is the law of ideas, of improvisations and seasons of belief." Rosenblatt, Skarmeta and Stevens make clear that it is incumbent upon a reader to join an author simultaneously, open-heartedly, self-reverentially and receptively to the dynamic possibilities of the text. As a teacher in a classroom, how do I guide students who don't experience the power of reading? How do I begin to work with students who prefer to swallow rather than savor words?

Rosenblatt's cornucopia process of reading a poem or text as a lived-through event is distinct from decoding isolated words. Happily, the lived-through event of the poem has transpired often in my life as a reader. I have read various novels employing the structural motif of the interior monologue. Such novels include *The House on Mango Street*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *A Prayer for Owen Meaney*. In these novels the introspective narrators serve to highlight, even parallel, the recursive nature of the collaboration between reader and poem-as-event. *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros is narrated by a young girl. The dynamic between the young girl telling the story and her metacognitive awareness of herself as storyteller models Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reading. Cisneros is not transmitting static wisdom to me as her reader and neither am I flagrantly or recklessly manipulating her text. Together Cisneros and I are exploring the dimensions of experience and aesthetic creation in the article of her text. The young girl, Esperanza, is engaged in a psychic and physical quest to reconfigure her life via the meditative power of writing. Rosenblatt promotes reconfiguration,

regeneration and affirmation with the vibrant process of a lived-through literary experience. The tender reconciliation of artificially opposed forces is realized as author, poem, and reader unite within the magnificent construct of Cisneros' imaginative immersion of despair, hope, and memory. The conclusion encourages contemplation on several levels, but most emphatically the conclusion provokes a consideration of the constructing forces of identity. As an educator, how do I reconcile my identity as a lover of reading with the students in my class who so often will flagrantly disregard the magic of a lived-through event?

Background: Who Are My Students?

My students have confirmed educational histories of reading and other general academic difficulties. They have been described as apathetic, disruptive, and obstinate. Their Gates-MacGinitie scores range from 2.7 to 6.6. Their Informal Reading Inventory scores range from fourth to tenth grade for word recognition and fourth to sixth grade for comprehension/instructional level. Their classroom grades teeter on the precipice of failure. I would have to re-imagine my instructional point of departure, rejecting reductionary stances, didactic frameworks, and deficit models by examining what my students enjoy. I had to build on their prior knowledge and present affinities in order to cultivate confidence and motivation.

I teach five developmental reading classes. Through careful and systematic observation I noticed my students' passion for drawing. They were constantly sketching in and out of class. Most striking is the pride, along with the personal and social respect, visual art affords. Consequently, re-imagining of my instructional point of departure led to the following practitioner inquiry research question: Can the visual arts enhance and extend the reading repertoire of my passive/resistant readers? Can art amplify textual engagement?

My objective was to create avenues for active and engaged learning with my students. For the purpose of this study I employed the following definition: an engaged reader possesses a flexible and fluent reading repertoire, displays higher-level thinking skills (including regular self-reflection), and demonstrates creative problem-solving techniques. Furthermore, I was influenced by Lipson and Wixon's guiding questions regarding student motivation:

- In reading are you (the teacher) encouraging students to immerse themselves in reading and responding?
- Are students encouraged to share what they have read and/or written?
- Are reading and writing activities authentic and relevant to the students' needs and interests? (Lipson and Wixon, 1997, p. 203)

I was also influenced by the following statements from the *International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English Guidelines for Assessment*:

- Assessment must serve, not harm, each and every student. Assessment should emphasize what students can do (13).
- “The more ownership the various participants feel in the assessment process, the more seriously they value their own and others’ stake in the process, the greater their possibility of quality assessment” (36).

These ideas facilitated the production of assessment criteria to validate students’ immersion in reading and emphasize their ownership and involvement with reading. This criteria is given form in the worksheet entitled, “Read, Draw, Respond and Recall” and the Motivational CheckList, (both will be further detailed).

I focused my attention on my fifth period class for several reasons: they were my smallest class (10 students) which allowed me ample time for complete observation, they were my most demanding group behaviorally and would benefit from practitioner research, and they showed great difficulty with any reading task requiring sustained focus. None of these ten students is diagnosed with a formal learning disability. All ten students speak at least two languages at home. Seven students are first generation Americans and three students were born outside the United States. Several students have recently exited the ESL program. The majority of fifth period is employed in part-time jobs. The exact number is constantly in transition due to frequent job changes. Many students have younger siblings for whom they take considerable responsibility.

The framework I established would have a dual center: biography and the response mechanism of visual art. I decided to center fifth period’s reading around biography because biography is often a high-interest genre featuring textual characteristics that appeal to young adults. These characteristics include a strong central character, the exploration of relationships and the examination of real-life situations detailing problem-solving techniques. Furthermore, biography offers readers excellent opportunities to transact with the textual action along literal, figurative and applied dimensions of comprehension while encouraging personal responses. Simply put, I felt that biography offered the best possibility for fifth period to join an author simultaneously, open-heartedly, self-reverentially and receptively to the dynamic possibilities of the text. Biography would invite Rosenblatt’s textual transaction. The materials utilized hail from two sources: The Washington Post’s biographical sketches of local residents published in January, 2000; and Stars Biographies, a publisher-generated series of one-page articles about contemporary personalities like Kobe Bryant, Missy Eliot and Vonetta Lopez.

In addition to the self-assessment measures I administered in September, I began my research by gathering student information from my own extensive questionnaire. Finally, I gave fifth period a pre-test in order to anchor their performance. This pre-test involved the silent reading of a one-page Stars biography and answering a series of typical standardized questions. On average the students scored forty points out of a possible fifty points. Once we began the project, fifth period would spend between 20-30 minutes each class reading a new one-page biography. However, before answering the standardized

questions my students would now complete a series of drawings requiring them to illustrate the plot, the main idea and a personal response. In order to organize the illustrations I devised a worksheet entitled “Read, Draw, Respond, Recall.” This allowed students to reconfigure the text as filtered through their mind’s eye. After completing illustrations, each student would informally talk about his/her drawing with a partner, myself, the whole class, or a combination of all three.

To establish some accountability for my observations it was necessary to utilize a checklist. I have been heavily influenced by Jeffrey Wilhelm’s examination of textual interaction and reader involvement. So based on Wilhelm’s work and informed by the ideas of Lipson and Wixon along with the *IRA & NCTE Guidelines for Assessment*, I devised a Motivational CheckList. The Motivational CheckList served as the backbone of my research. My intention was to record observations on my Motivational CheckList that would validate my hypothesis that employing art as a response mechanism to reading would heighten the engagement of fifth period’s resistant readers, thereby yielding improved scores on the standardized follow-up questions.

For the culminating project of the biography/visual arts unit I would distribute disposable cameras to each student. The students, with guiding instructions on appropriateness and deportment, would use these cameras to capture images from their lives. Once the film was developed each student would create a high impact portfolio featuring written accounts of the pictures. The Stars Biography readings would serve as concrete and familiar models for the students’ written accounts. My hope was to knit together the visual and the textual creating a collaboration between students’ school lives and their broader experiences.

The timeframe for the unit would span between four and six weeks.

Focus on Backwards Design

In the standards-based environment, authentic assessment drives instruction. While this may seem initially disconcerting, it does not demand sanitized pedagogical methods. Rather, thinking backwards allowed me to clarify my own thinking and actions, justify my methodology and build consensus. I asked myself the following questions prior to beginning the biography/visual arts unit:

- What should my students be able to do at the conclusion of this unit/project?
- How will students demonstrate learning/reading proficiencies?
- How will learning be assessed?

Because standardized testing is a reality for my students, I am obligated to improve their ability to effectively handle such prescribed passages and questions. Consequently, the biography/visual arts unit did not employ self-selected readings. Self-selection may contribute to enhanced motivation, but for the purposes of this study I concentrated on building students motivation through alternative response mechanisms.

Reflections on Classroom Happenings: Methods

You can't always get what you want
 But if you try sometimes, you might just find
 You get what you need.

-The Rolling Stones

An initial disappointment was fifth period's ongoing change in composition. During the biography/visual arts project three students withdrew from Stuart; one student suffered from chronic absenteeism, making her participation impossible to account for; another student joined fifth period two weeks into the project; and yet another student returned to her country of origin for three weeks during the project. As a result, my data collection focused on five students.

A productive future practitioner inquiry project might examine the difficulties of classroom management with a rotating student population. How does a teacher sow the cohesion necessary to reap a community of readers when that community undergoes radical population changes on a weekly basis?

As I began to introduce the framework for the biography/visual arts unit I noticed the high level of apprehension the students had for unfamiliar tasks. While drawing was a pleasurable activity it had not heretofore occupied a formal position in the catalogue of school-sanctioned activities. Thus it was essential that I convey the idea that drawing ability would not be graded with the proverbial red pen. My assumption that transactional, powerful and engaged reading was dependent on finding a secured pathway for students to take ownership met with some resistance. The full impact of just how complicit my students were in the traditionally regimented classroom structure was unclear. One phenomenon I observed was an unwillingness to experiment, a reluctance to do anything except the conventional and repetitive activities which serve to validate a limited definition of literacy. Transactional reading and responding asks readers to use their voice in the process of constructing meaning. I had assumed that fifth period, once given an alternative response mechanism like drawing, would enjoy making their voices heard. Not so, at least not initially. Despite my theoretical understandings of the complex nature of reading acquisition, I imagined the liberation fifth period would experience when the curriculum provided an exciting format for them to connect with texts. My understanding of reading complexities did not consider the entrenchment of familiar educational structures. My frustration involved my early realization that my students would rather, "just get it over with," than linger with the possibilities of a project, even one that involved activities they ostensibly enjoyed. If my students viewed reading as a dictatorial and externally imposed activity; it is a view and a framework with which they are comfortable. I wanted to transcend the white noise of the scholastic routine, yet my students accepted this routine despite its marginalizing effects. To my consternation, I discovered that my students were surprisingly conventional.

Therefore, I cannot overemphasize the importance of modeling and frequent feedback throughout my research. Once fifth period completed several

“Read, Draw, Respond and Recall” exercises, they began to relax and experiment with the biographical texts and their corresponding drawings. Tentative progress was shown as students started underlining texts in order to complete drawings. Additionally, students began to polish their drawings. This care with the drawing resulted in increasingly rich conversations about reading where students used their illustrations as reference points. As I listened to these conversations, circulating while students were drawing or conferencing with individual students, I was able to utilize my motivational CheckList. Students began to notice the importance of making inferences and sequencing information. They began to relate to the characters in their reading, to find important themes and to relate these themes to their own experiences. Furthermore, they noticed textual significance and made steps in evaluating and reflecting on their own reading. They began to appreciate the importance of comprehension monitoring as it allowed them to better describe the reading. While fifth period did not make significant advancements on every dimension of response, they did enjoy an increased ability to construct and reconstruct the world of the text and to interpret and manipulate information. Again, this was evidenced through enhanced conversations around reading, the composition of the illustrations, the provocative questions asked by students regarding their reading and the students improved recall of textual information. Their critical and creative problem-solving skills improved as they selected information from reading, transferred information to their drawings and extended the information presented in the text by illustrating personal responses.

A further sign of increased textual engagement were the requests students made for feedback and commentary on the quality of their drawings. They also asked each other for advice on how to make improvements. These requests evolved into a running dialogue as the biography/visual arts unit progressed.

Conclusion

We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time

-T.S. Eliot

Fifth period’s standardized scores fluctuated initially. However, as the students continued to use art as a response mechanism, these scores improved. This improvement was not marked, but rather in the amount of two or three points. Each set of standardized questions was worth a total of fifty points. What does this reveal? It may demonstrate that while engagement is critical for thoughtful literacy, it is not imperative for standardized success. I prefer to look at those two to three points and think about what I as the teacher can do better next time. How can I provide better supports and structure so that students can build on those two to three points? Additionally, I wonder about my original intention to explore alternative response mechanisms to reading. I was eager to

create pathways that might lead to improved textual engagement. Do standardized questions supercede the pedagogical desire to generate a student-centered learning environment? Are standardized questions in direct and irreparable conflict with the *IRA and NCTE Guidelines for Assessment*? It appears that my students did have a positive response to the biography/visual arts unit. While they experienced initial frustrations with unfamiliar tasks, they did begin to assume an active agency, producing sensitive and sound readings. Do the minimal gains on standardized scores discount these more qualitative goals? I am happy that I implemented the Motivational CheckList as evidence to support fifth period's increased engagement. Furthermore, their illustrations document the significant gains made with textual involvement, along with the accurate ability to select main ideas and supporting details, define/modify reading goals, manipulate information and reflect upon themselves as readers.

As previously stated the biography/visual arts unit would culminate with the distribution of disposable cameras leading to the production of student portfolios using text and photo images. The students' response to the use of the cameras was enthusiastic and energetic. Once the film was developed, fifth period was thrilled to share the pictures and utilize the paint and markers I bought to enhance their portfolios. We also integrated magazine clippings in order to create increasingly evocative biographical portfolios.

The benefit of descriptors was obvious as demonstrated by their absence. Because the portfolios were a work-in-progress for me as well as my students I had no final example to show the students as we began the biography/visual arts unit. This lack of descriptors led to some initial confusion, but happily I completed each phase of my own portfolio a day or two before the students. While fifth period did not begin the construction of their own portfolios with a view of a finished product, they did get specific details in sequential order.

I can report that the finished portfolios are outstanding. They are bold and monumental. The students creatively placed photos and magazine clippings on artfully prepared backgrounds. The images used show the complexity and diversity of their individual lives. During the time fifth period was making their portfolios the classroom mood was collaborative and industrious. Through the portfolio construction, students became active agents in their own education. These portfolios are direct documentation that school environments can connect with the lives of students and do so in an authentic manner nurturing important academic competencies. These competencies include attention to detail, self-assessment, organization of information, and synthesis of information. Most remarkably, fifth period was motivated by the portfolio assignment. This is not to claim that fifth period displayed great anticipation to begin work each day, nevertheless fifth period did show increased self-reliance and an innovative spirit as they assembled their portfolios.

The completion of the portfolio's writing portion required a substantial amount of encouragement from me. Although, fifth period was accustomed to the structure and content of the Stars Biography texts, beginning the process of writing was arduous. Throughout the year my Developmental Reading students have been continuously asked to employ writing. All students are familiar with

building webs, brainstorming, free writing and crafting structured written responses. I give this background in order to show that the autobiographical writing they were required to perform was not an unusual requirement. Despite the initial anxiety, sitting down with each student individually and conferencing about the content of his/her pictures generated a dialogue that allowed the students to begin the composition process. Additionally, students referred to a list of suggested questions that I compiled to act as a catalyst for writing. Finally, as I had hoped the images the students used in their portfolios were powerful catalysts for writing. By contemplating the pictures of their family, friends, school or jobs, students were better able to identify subjects and themes for their writing.

This process has served as a catalyst for my own personal reflection regarding my goals as an instructor of reluctant/developing readers. How do I rank my goals? Am I caught with a binary opposition between the impersonal nature of standardized achievement and the personal needs of students? Is it valid to want to help my students realize a “deeper more elaborated learning” style; is it valid to want my students to appreciate reading and “savor words?” These are difficult questions. Thus a taboo pedagogical sentiment arises, one that is winked at, implied or discussed in euphemisms: should (not does) the educational system set different goals for different students? Given the limited time we as teachers have and the philosophical emphasis that “all students can learn,” should there be an explicit differentiation made between the comprehensive academic goals set for developing readers and high-achieving students? Does this question invoke the perils of economic stratification? Does it limit potential? Does it quash the promise of public education? In fact, this idea of differentiation is anathema to me; I came to this profession because I believe reading saves lives. Reading begets personal and economic power. As T.S. Eliot states, I have returned to “the place where I started” and while I don’t fully “know” this place, my practice has been enriched by the journey. I “know” I must address the multiplicity of needs in my classroom. This is often daunting. It must be incremental. I am up to the challenge. I turn to Bintz’s for a measure of concluding elucidation, “If I’ve learned anything from this inquiry, its been that we can’t expect students to reflect on and transform their own behaviors and attitudes about reading until we start reflecting on and transforming our own”(Bintz, 1993, p. 614).

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Appendices available upon request.

When some time is set aside for creativity in between all the strenuous study times, it takes a lot of stress away from students. This sense of joy keeps them relaxed and reduces their anxiety which in turn helps them to prepare well for exams and excel in it. Integrating more hands-on learning and making room for visual reflection is really going to make a positive impact. Encouraging productive discussions as well as making the classroom layout more flexible all matters a lot in gearing up a creative classroom atmosphere. 6. Boosts Problem Solving Skills. The brainstorming activities involvi...
Creativity is a sense of purpose that lets you to be in a happy zone and learn with fun. It is important to develop such skills. The kids are a scream! I've been making anchor charts for them because I'm a visual learner. I like to see in print what I am learning. So, I just assume these kids can also benefit - hence the love of anchor charts. I'm literally obsessed with pinning them on my Pinterest account.
I am so excited about the possibilities this year will bring and the improvements that I anticipate seeing in my students' writing! Already, I am seeing improvements that amaze me. Summarizing is such an important part of reading and writing that this has been one of my first lessons in writing the past couple of years.
Language Arts Anchor Charts - Great for Upper Elementary Teachers. prefixes, suffixes, root words anchor charts -- good idea for next year (to display words around the room). Visual aids engage students and help them to retain information. This guide will show you 10 essential visual aids for learning you should be using.
Visual aids for learning can also expand beyond the realm of just classroom posters and presentations. You can also visually enhance documents like student progress reports, lesson plans, and research reports. After all, teachers can get bored too, right? via GIPHY. With a beginner-friendly design tool like Venngage, creating custom visual for any topic you want to cover is easier than ever. Here are 10 types of visual aids for learning that will engage students and help you plan and deliver lessons more effectively. I've also included some design tips to help you get started. 1. Educational p