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ABSTRACT

Visual compositions can be used in the content areas to address comprehension problems posed by implicit factors in any content theme. The importance of a visual presentation for writing is that it can instantly portray the theme to be learned and act as a catalyst to elicit words and sentences to help explain that content theme. Stages of visual/verbal understanding achieved through visual compositions include (1) viewing a content area theme (nonverbal receptive input); (2) composing the explicit and implicit information seen in that theme (visualizing holistic meaning and coupling visual meaning with language); (3) writing the theme's information in one's own words (expressing style and organization by applying written language code); and (4) reading the content assignment (comprehending style and organization through previous visual/verbal input). The more that teachers use picture arrangement to complement the writing styles in content areas, the more they can achieve the four stages of communication development. Essentially visual compositions provide stimuli for developing language skill while motivating students to read and write. Moreover, since patterns of written organization are unique to particular content fields, students can learn the structure of content area organization by viewing the visual composition organized in the same way. Visual composition encourages students to deal with explicit and implicit text factors, promoting a more global understanding of content themes. (HOD)

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TITLE: Visual Compositions: A Way to Teach Explicit
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VISUAL COMPOSITIONS: A WAY TO TEACH
EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT TEXT FACTORS
IN CONTENT AREAS

What is involved in any act of communication? During verbal interaction, we are aware that a listener and a speaker are necessary to fulfill the requirements of an oral act of communication while a writer and reader are needed to complete a written act. However, during non-verbal visual communication, meaning is also transmitted and received in ways that can be more rapid, dynamic and complete than for verbal exchanges. In fact, some feel that the image-centered mode of visual communication has conditioned a new style of thinking process in modern youth, one dominated by right hemisphere activity (Postman, 1979). A challenge for the content area teacher is to use the concreteness and immediacy of visual presentations to help translate the linear, sequential nature of written discourse usually processed by the left brain of most learners. For example, when a social studies teacher visually presents a series of pictures or slides which suggests that a war began after a heated debate by statesmen, students are lead into a cause and effect organizational style for their verbal discourse which could be expressed in either oral or written modes (see Figure 2.)

Since a good deal of content area instruction involves reading and writing input, the more deliberate, left hemisphere of the brain is activated to process the literal and denotative relationships. Glassner (1980) reflects the feelings of many educators today when he points out that our language curriculum has a lopsided emphasis on analytic skills especially regarding the more conscious, left-brained stages of writing instruction. Language rules in the classroom, but it is almost always the language of reporting and not the language of discovery or of learning. The non-verbal mode of visual communication is a unique, holistic way to achieve a discovery approach to language learning. A visual presentation can represent a content theme in the sense that a picture of a car represents a particular car. If students then read about that content theme, they have a clear visual referent with which to tie their sentence meanings. The importance of a visual presentation for writing is that it can instantly portray the theme to be learned and act as a catalyst to elicit words and sentences to help explain that content theme.

Factors in Visual/Verbal Texts

Composers of visual stories can be compared to writers in their roles as transmitters of information.

The visual composer combines objects, space, light, angle, and mood to faithfully represent a particular scene or to infer a particular message or effect. The viewer "reads" the message by mentally coordinating the relationship within the picture story. Understanding and analyzing the syntax of visual communication involves higher-level thought processes in which the visual reader interprets the relationships during visuals or among a sequence of real or filmed actions (Clayback, Goforth, and Spillman, 1980). Furthermore, just as a writer selects words that have objective and emotional connotations, the picture-maker conveys images that work on many levels to suggest humor, irony, or symbolic commentary (Eckhardt, 1977). However, in most content-oriented instruction today, we still have not capitalized on the impact of organized visual messages to portray that content so that its meaning will be rapidly and holistically grasped and its imagery can be used to strengthen comprehension of explicit and implicit text relationships.

When a series of pictures are arranged to visually communicate meaning, a visual composition has been composed. Both visual and written content have many of the same organizational ingredients. They each have a central meaning or theme, a series of details or related events which develop that theme, and a syntactical arrangement which

expresses logic and clarity amongst the details. Moreover, they can each describe very literal, explicit experiences or they can require the receiver to interpret implicit features suggested through such techniques as tone, innuendo, and understatement.

The explicit and implicit factors of visual/verbal texts are important to consider for student understanding of content area relationships. Explicit factors of comprehension are those factors which are "outside the head" (Pearson and Johnson, 1978). Conversely, the implicit factors of communication are those that are "inside the head." Explicit factors in communication correspond to the literal level of comprehension. The literal level is explicit leaving no options for more than one interpretation. It narrows down meaning to a preciseness, to a single understanding. Because the literal level is so precise as to meaning, the content writer must learn just how much information is necessary to communicate a point. Growth in communicating necessarily means an increase in the ability to deal with explicit factors of denotative words, development of detail, and actual verbalization rather than implication. Interestingly, these are tasks generally processed by the deliberate, analytic left brain.

The implicit factors in communication are no less

important and must be developed in readers and writers as well. Implicitness corresponds to the figurative level of comprehension and involves right-brained input to process the connotative, associative, and image-producing power of words. Implicit factors are those that are "in the head" that the receiver must infer because they are ambiguous. The receiver must fill in unstated steps and deal with implied ellipsis. Implicit factors are symbolism, connotations and ambiguous, suggestive information which require the receiver to make logical connections and draw conclusions. There is no single meaning intended by the sender so that interpretation by the receiver is subjective. Certainly, implicit factors can cause comprehension and interpretation "problems" in the highest forms of our literature. Helping students to deal with implicit discourse factors and to receive and send communications on the figurative level would be a major reason why content area teachers would use visual presentations.

Visual Compositions and Verbal Processing Modes

Visual compositions can be used in the content areas to address comprehension problems posed by implicit factors in any content theme. A visual composition is a series of drawings, pictures, slides, or photographs that explores

the development of one theme. Visual compositions can be planned in distinct stages to elicit organized verbal stories that model differing styles of written discourse (Sinatra, 1980, 1981). Essentially, visuals bring the concrete world to the classroom and because of their concreteness, they directly portray the explicit aspects of a theme as well as increasing the availability of imagery in recall (Paivio, 1979). In other words, the visual imagery the student remembers due to the pictorial input is recalled more rapidly, more holistically than the words needed to describe the images. Since most visual themes are in the visual experiences of students, they would "fill in" or provide the implicit information not specifically communicated by any one picture of the sequence. The group of related pictures can then be structured to give students the opportunity for viewing them, orally composing the relationships perceived within the visual theme, writing down the ideas using their own language forms, and reading and sharing the resultant written compositions. Because the students have used several processing modes relating to one experience, they have been involved as both senders and receivers and have explored the structural organization of that theme. The pictures provide a literal framework so that implicit relationships within the written mode can be better understood.

The following figure shows that four interlocking stages of visual/verbal communication occur with the use of each visual composition and indicates the processing mode achieved during each stage. Receptive processing of visual/verbal input occurs during viewing and reading, while expressive language processing occurs during the composing and writing stages. It is most important to consider the impact of the composing stage for each student. Once the visual sequence of the content theme has been viewed, students are aided in conceptualizing the main idea. Then continued composing will occur as appropriate language forms are associated with the theme's essential meaning and the details that relate to that central theme. Thus, students fill in the content based on how their own experience provided implicit information for that theme. Teachers are often reminded that lack of experiential background can influence understanding and construction of written discourse. The visual composition, however, provides the same experiential base for each viewer and allows the teacher to refer to the same concrete referent to associate with the written text during the reading stage. The sequence of the stages thus indicates that comprehending the theme and structural style of the content is a direct function of active involvement in viewing, composing, and writing that

particular style.

Figure 1. Stages of Visual/Verbal Understanding Achieved through Visual Compositions

<u>Stage 1</u>	<u>Stage 2</u>	<u>Stage 3</u>	<u>Stage 4</u>
Viewing a content area theme	Composing the explicit and implicit information seen in that theme	Writing the theme's information in own words	Reading the content assignment
Non-Verbal receptive input	Visualizing holistic meaning and coupling visual meaning with language	Expressing style and organization by applying written language code	Comprehending style and organization through previous visual/verbal input

We have been suggesting the use of picture sequences primarily since they involve students in the learning of the structure of discourse; however, single pictures relating to one aspect of the content theme can be a powerful way to create a single central image that functions to pull together and succinctly represent the extrinsic information. Bugelski (1977) felt that a central or key image can function as a focal associating mechanism for a good deal of verbal information. When a reader, for example, is asked to form a central image of the content based on a picture cue, the reader is provided with a way to understand the selection better since the major focus of the selection could be visualized in one prominent image. Such powerful prominent images we

all have from our early studies of the American Revolution are mental pictures of the Minutemen formed to meet the British on the lawn at Concord, Paul Revere leaning from his galloping horse to warn of the British Invasion, and the portrait of George Washington at the stern of a boat while crossing the Delaware.

However, the visual composition requires a sequence of pictures relating to one common theme. Students have learned to read visuals sequentially in time through countless hours of television viewing (Debes, 1976). Since their right hemispheres have been saturated with visual language, we need to provide them with the opportunity to express themselves using that hemisphere. Debes concludes that once the visual material is organized, translation from visual language forms to verbal language forms, is relatively easy.

Visual Compositions and Content Area Writing

We know that content fields have their own particular organizational styles and vocabulary requirements. For instance, Robinson (1975) has identified six writing patterns that appear frequently in science content, seven in social studies, and three in mathematics. The more that teachers use picture arrangements to complement the writing styles of content areas, the more they can achieve the four stages of communication development shown in Figure 1. The next



figure suggests how picture arrangements may be organized to complement the major writing styles of various content areas (Figure 2). The text factors column indicates the degree of difficulty that may be encountered in the writing style of any content area.

All students should be able to express a literal level of meaning from viewing the visual compositions. Communicating implicitly written themes can also be facilitated if oral composing occurs prior to writing. Essentially, visual compositions provide stimuli for developing language skill while motivating students to write and to read. Moreover, since patterns of written organization are unique to particular content fields, students can learn the structure of content area organization from viewing the visual composition organized the same way. Visual compositions encourage students to deal with explicit and implicit text factors, promoting a more global understanding of content themes.

Figure 2. Picture Arrangements Applicable to the Content Area Writing Styles

Content Area	Picture Arrangements	Writing Style	Text Factors
Math Science Home Economics Industrial Arts Foreign Languages Physical Education Art Music	Events in a sequence or steps in a process: contests, sports events beginning to ending of an activity	Procedural A direction or step-by-step relating of a process; has a final outcome or product	Explicit: direct information, precise word meanings, literal statements Implicit: abbreviations and symbols, hidden steps, connotations, conclusions to be drawn
Social Studies English Science Home Economics	On a central theme or idea which has numerous examples; characters involved in persuasion, advertisements	Topic Exposition Argument or clear topic. Statement with supporting details and logical transitions	Explicit: literal statements, direct information, details Implicit: ambiguity in referents and transitions, connotations, implications which require inferencing
Social Studies Home Economics Industrial Arts Physical Education Math English	Events leading up to a solution, before and after effects of an event	Time Order Problem solution, cause and effect	Explicit: literal statements, direct information, denotative words Implicit: causal inferences, connotative words, ambiguous associations and connections, synthesis of events, conclusions implied
Social Studies English Home Economics Science Foreign Languages	Descriptive scene with characters performing an action in a particular setting; pictures showing likenesses and differences in characters, scenes, events	Narration/ Description Tell a story using description, characters and plot; compare and contrast using coordinating conjunctions such as but, or, however	Explicit: literal statements, denotative words Implicit: Connotative word meanings, metaphors, symbolism, levels of meanings (literal and figurative), ambiguity in motivations, events, clues (foreshadowing), theme implied

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