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ABSTRACT

This paper defines visual literacy, provides a synopsis of the current research on political awareness among today's youth, and shows how using political cartoons with children and adolescents will enhance their political cognition. It introduces the political cartoon, defining and describing what makes a political cartoon particularly effective in terms of teaching visual literacy. The political cartoon may be one means by which politics can be more relevant to the young. It is a visual editorial, an interpretive picture which makes use of symbolism and bold and humorous exaggeration to present a message or point of view concerning people, events, or situations. The political cartoon can be used with young people to teach visual literacy by: (1) training the right hemisphere of the brain; (2) training for familiarity of conventions; (3) teaching abstractness and symbolism, decoding strategies, ridicule, satire, and parody; (4) helping children learn to glean abstract meaning from visual literacy; (5) training children to communicate in nonverbal ways; (6) helping children operate at higher cognitive levels through creative and critical thinking; (7) enhancing the political cognition of the young; teaching concepts of conflict, dissent, and criticism in politics; and (8) helping make the young more realistic consumers of U.S. politics. Appendices describing the editorial cartoon and a model for interpreting editorial cartoons are provided. (Author/SWC)

Using Editorial Cartoons in the Curriculum to Enhance Visual (and Political) Literacy

by
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This paper on using political cartoons with children and young adults to teach visual literacy is divided into two parts: an introductory part and a final section with an opportunity to interpret a political cartoon.

By way of introductory material, I would like to define what we mean by visual literacy; then I would like to synopsize the current research on political awareness among today's youth, and show how using political cartoons with children and adolescents will enhance their political cognition. Finally, I will introduce the political cartoon, define it, and describe what makes a political cartoon particularly effective in terms of teaching visual literacy.

Visual Literacy

The concept of visual literacy is credited to one John Debes, who, at a meeting in Rochester, NY, in 1969, defined visual literacy as

> a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. . .these competencies, when developed, enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment.

This definition, which surfaced widely and enjoyed a vogue in the early 1970s, when the impact of television viewing on the U.S. young was beginning to be a national concern, stressed picture comprehension. Early visual literacy experts stressed critical viewing skills and used picture book or films to help children be more critical in their viewing.

In the past 20 years, however, a shift has occurred in visual literacy research. In the 1970s, we found out, for example, that visual messages are processed by the brain's right hemisphere, while traditional language arts "stuff"--spelling, writing, phonemic discriminations, for example, are processed by the left. We know that imagery is based on right brain functioning, and that the right brain can be manipulated to stir and arouse creative imagination. The right brain excels at holistic and spatial learning and has been described as the metaphoric mind. And we also know for sure now that visual literacy meaning precedes verbal learning. Piaget's statement that "sources of thought are not to be found in language, but in the nonverbal. Visual-motion reconstruction performed by the very young child" is absolutely true. The first state of literacy development is that of visual literacy.

Recent definitions of visual literacy focus almost exclusively on the imagistic aspect of thinking. A 1982 definition says that visual literacy is "the ability to understand and use images and to think and learn in terms of images, i.e., to think visually." Also stressed today in the new definition of visual literacy is nonverbal, communicative techniques and skills--the graphic experience, visual literacy as a means to communicate with each other in nonverbal ways. The stress then today is on the communication process. "Visual literacy is fundamental to human thinking and develops through the interaction of three basic components," reads one definition, which are viewing, exploration, and nonverbal representation. Visual literacy today is defined as the active reconstruction of past visual experiences with incoming visual information to obtain meaning. In effect, visual communication has replaced the concept we once called visual literacy.

To summarize, visual literacy now goes beyond critical viewing skills, and encompasses, as David Considine has said, "the ability to analyze, understand, and appreciate visual messages." Visually literate students, he said, "should be able to produce and interpret visual images and messages." Current researchers are convinced that the right hemisphere of the brain can be trained. One way of doing this might be to study paintings, where parts acquire meaning through their relationship to the whole. Another means might be the study of imagery--images that present ideas. One researcher, for example,

Edward Fry, works with graphs, because they communicate a concept often better than words; "the basic transmission [of graphs] is nonverbal and graphs," he says, "pack a high density of information into a small area." The picture book is also a good means to use to train youngsters to interpret images, and so, I will argue, is the political cartoon.

The Political Cognition and Socialization of Children and Adolescents

Several major studies have been published in the mid-1980s concerning childhood and adolescent political socialization and cognition, one done with children from K-4, and one done with adolescents, both longitudinal studies, conducted during the politically volatile mid-1970s. Both maintain that "the truly informative years of the maturing members of a political system would seem to be in the years between 3 and 13, but that the most significant changes take place between 12 and 16."

One of the earliest signs of political awareness is symbol recognition. By the 4th grade, virtually all children can recognize pictures of the American flag, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, the Statue of Liberty, the Liberty Bell, those symbols which have been called "unifying symbols," though they cannot then recognize the symbols representing partisan institutions (those representing the national parties, the White House, the National Capitol). By the end of the 4th grade, although 90 percent of the students know their own state, only 70 percent know their own country (this after five years of flag saluting). Issue awareness among fourth graders is also fairly low (this was a period of Watergate, Nixon, the energy crisis, and the end of the Vietnam War), and there is limited ability of all children through fourth garde to distinguish governmental from nongovernmental roles (75 percent say that television news commentators are government employees; they think teachers are privately paid). In the fourth grade, only ten percent of the children can define *politician*, only 41 percent know what a political party is, and, though 86 percent of them had heard of the Republicans and 79 percent of the Democrats, few, of course, had made any party identification. By the time they are in fifth grade, children appear only to have gained "an extensive acquaintance with politics"; they know what the President does, about taxes, about the electoral process, a bit about the role of Congress, and Supreme Court, and the role of the senators. In terms of law and morality, they know what a judge does, though only 20 percent associate judges with trials, and, for the most part, they believe that anyone brought before a court has *ipso facto* violated the law. Most young children view law as the institutions that protect people from danger and harm.

In terms of political affect, data suggest the presence among elementary school children of a high level of support for the political system: 90 percent think policemen are their friends; 85 percent say the government "cares about ordinary people like us," and 2/3 say the government would "help us if we needed it." Among elementary school children there is a general optimism about our government, a tendency to feel increasingly positive toward it. However, thought they are optimistic and idealistic, they are realistic about the fallibility of government and realize that the government and president can make mistakes. They answer the question, "Is America the best country in the world?" by saying they don't know a better one. Elementary school children are rule-and-law oriented. People need to obey laws; it is essential for the good of the entire society, and their vision of a lawless society is a chaotic society.

Among elementary children, there is a widespread perception of presidential and governmental benevolence; actually 40 percent of kindergartners believe God or Jesus is "the boss of our country", and this is a feeling that they will later transfer to the president, when they become aware of him as a secular authority. By the fifth grade, they can distinguish between an occupant of the presidency and the institution.

Elementary school children idealistically believe the primary purpose of government is to help those in need. They object to protest; a good citizen is one who obeys laws, not a person who votes issues to effect change. Egocentric children see government as helping them and those they love.

The elementary school child is quite naive politically. It takes skill and persistence on the part of parents and teachers to increase substantive awareness before a child has matured to the point where abstract understanding such as the various levels of government and the distinction between public and private functions are possible. Obviously, it would be nice if elementary school curricula

could be strengthened to facilitate both faster learning and more functional and realistic perceptions of political phenomena. One of the problems seems to be that our children are not taught dissention or diversion; they are only being taught the authoritativeness of our institutions. They aren't being taught conflicting values or the competitive side of U.S. politics. They need to learn to identify public issues. They have an exaggerated belief in the efficacy of their ability to influence government and they don't understand that conflict, competition, and compromise are essential in government. Furthermore, researchers believe teachers can and should take a much more active role in promoting the elementary school child's appreciation for the competitive side of democratic politics and the benefits of diversity, pragmatism, and change. They should be helped to identify public issues and to develop the young child's participation skills. "Overemphasis on unifying or consensual symbols" and overlooking "symbols which represent disagreement, conflict, and debate, with a more realistic understanding of pluralism and diversity, and internal conflict, would prepare children to play a more vigorous role in the political process in later life."

Preadolescents, children in the middle school, are very aware of the political phenomena but they also have an exaggerated belief in the efficacy of individuals to influence government and unrealistic beliefs about equality of political opportunity; moreover, they still fail to understand that conflict and compromise are basic elements of the political process in the U.S. Seventh and eighth graders, in fact, view conflicts between Democrats and Republicans as disruptive and dysfunctional, and also view criticism of public officials during political campaigns as undesirably divisive.

The most significant changes in political thinking take place between the ages of eleven and fifteen, when the change is made from concrete to formal operations. "The adolescent years see sweeping changes in the comprehension of the political order." Though young adolescents have only a dim recognition of politics and government and their understanding of these topics is diffuse, personalized and concrete, by the end of adolescence, the young person has invariably achieved an abstract, undifferentiated and functional view of the political scene. The reasons are plentiful: Piaget says adolescence is the first time the child is capable of abstract thinking; also, before the age of fifteen, children have trouble conceiving of the community as a whole. Because they can't imagine an abstract collectivity, they can't take into account the present or future needs of government of the community and can't grasp the institutions of government and the concept of representation. Also, by fifteen, the youngster adopts a functional view of law as an experiment that can be amended, or, if ineffectual, can be abandoned or revised, this due to the fact that the capacity to think in terms of "what if" only occurs in adolescence.

It has been bandied about in the literature that adolescents are political idealists at the age of fifteen or sixteen. But recent research indicates that they are really political realists, and, in fact, a recent study suggests that late adolescents are currently cynical and are becoming more so. Unlike younger children, they don't idealize authority, and generally speaking, they are highly critical of the way government is performing. Unfortunately, even though adolescence is a period of vast growth in terms of the acquisition of political information (they understand about consensus, they have a feeling for the common and prevailing ways of looking a political issues, they have the cognitive capacity that allows for the birth of ideology, and they no longer believe in the omnipresence of authoritarianism). Few adolescents care about politics, and, like most adults in this country, unless they personally feel threatened (or unless they come from a politically active and aware family, they will never become active political thinkers. By the time the adolescent is a high school senior, "the ability to process political information, acquire knowledge of current events, and comprehend fairly complex political concepts is about on a par with most adults."

The adolescent period is when democratic beliefs must become firmly anchored, when political awareness must acquire structure and when political preferences must be born to enhance the likelihood of active, informed adults. It is, said one researcher, a "period of great political potential."

As just mentioned, the politically active family is the prime source of political awareness. Although studies in the 1960s indicated that the "public school," as one study put it, "was the most important and effective instrument of political socialization in the U.S.," today the bulk of data indicate that, although the school environment has the "potential to stimulate

future political involvement," the school has only marginal influence, especially at the high school level. The curriculum today is so bland that its content is highly unlikely to induce interest in politics, and, although most researchers believe the teacher could be an important figure for politicalization, most teachers shy away from political issues. As a conclusion to their four year study of 1,000 Pennsylvania high school students, Roberta Sigel and Marilyn Hoskin write in *The Political Involvement of Adolescents* (1981):

> From the evidence we have gathered, it appears that traditional teachers--the family, the schools, the media have not effectively conveyed a message that politics is relevant to the average citizen . . ." Commenting on the inadequate ways in which newspapers and television inform the public on such questions, Walter Cronkite stressed the need to engage the public more in its own affairs. "The continuation of our democracy demands no less, and yet . . . surveys indicate that the job isn't getting done."

A similar charge could be made against the public schools and other institutions commonly believed to involve youth in the life of the polity. For those of us who believe that an involved citizenry is still an important democratic goal, the questions of how to raise the relevance level of politics may well be the most important we have posed in this book.

The Political Cartoon

It is my contention that the political cartoon may well be one means by which we could raise the "relevance level" of politics among the young. The political cartoon, or visual editorial as it is sometimes called, is an interpretive picture which makes use of symbolism and, most often, bold and humorous exaggeration to present a message or point of view concerning people, events or situations.

All forms of graphic art that contain critical commentary (Think of the *New Yorker* cartoons as well as the political cartoon.), are alike in that they muse upon the ridiculous and incongruous in life, and they all have the repeated theme of the contrast between reality and ideal, between what is and should be. The hallmark of the political cartoon and its differentiating feature is that it is usually partisan. {I've heard cartoonists called "opinion hustlers.") Political cartoons seek to do more than amuse, though satire and ridicule are certainly tricks of their trade. In fact, they attempt to influence the viewer to a particular viewpoint, to their creator's way of thinking.

Because of this, the political cartoon puts more stress on *ideas* being presented in a striking way than on the artistry. Although the political cartoon has always been an aesthetic achievement only by accident. (Its purpose is propaganda not art.) I would like to stress that I feel strongly that the political cartoon is an art form.

The subject of the cartoon should have lasting importance. A great cartoonist cannot be trite, even when inspired by a trite event. He has to somehow twist his subject matter into a statement that lasts beyond the event, to generalize or universalize from it into comment applicable to many time and seasons. Most cartoons have a basis in truth, and include recognizable characters and events from reality. In fact, most cartoons center on events, ideas or concepts, or a personality of recent interest.

Cartoons are interpretive. They serve to make sense of political things that are and will be important to us. The cartoonist/critic provides information selectively, winnowing out, attempting to asses what is important, focusing our attention, interpreting policies and politicians and projecting judgment about the system itself.

Cartoons have three elements:

* It is a picture of reality. The cartoonist deals with assumptions about reality.
* It is a message about what the cartoonist thinks ought to be done on behalf of the deserving. The cartoonist takes a protection of the larger community stance.
* It tells us about how we should feel about what is happening.

The political cartoon is supposed to beam out a specific message that political leaders or government officials can do something about--a message about intolerance, injustice, political corruption, various other social evils. The message, as I just said, grows out of concern for what one writer called "the cherished community" and therefore becomes the moral justification of the cartoon production.

The cartoonist has to put his message across in some way that will be striking, forceful, amusing, or all three. His message is clothed in images, which have to be fresh, original, and comprehensible--they shouldn't be too complex, elaborate, obscure, involved or complicated. The meaning and mood of a cartoon is projected through several means: the use of imagery: the choice of setting, characters, costume used, the situation portrayed, e.g., Nixon as a hobo, and the use of symbols and caricature. As we heard when I talked about the political cognition of the elementary school child, there are unifying, national symbols, which are idealistic and uplifting, and which present the moral aspects of the nation. Symbols are a form of shorthand, a convenience, not only for the artist, but for the viewer as well.

To summarize, the political cartoon, a signed visual editorial, is inherently critical and often satirical. It contains exaggerated ridicule, emphasizes more negative than positive, contains allegorical imagery, and is timely. The cartoonist acts as a critic or keeper of the ideals of the community, serves as a communication link between the governed and the governors, and is a keen critic and shaper of public opinion.

Using the Political Cartoon

Based on what I said earlier is needed to help children become better and wiser political consumers, it is our belief that the political cartoon can be used with young people in the following ways for education purposes:
to teach visual literacy,

* to train the right hemisphere of the brain,
* to train for familiarity of conventions,
* to help children understand about abstractness and symbolism,
* to teach decoding strategies,
* to help children learn to glean abstract meaning from visual literacy,
* to teach about ridicule, satire, and parody,
* to train children to communicate in nonverbal ways,
* to help children operate at higher cognitive levels through creative and critical thinking,
* to enhance the political cognition of the young,
* to help youth better understand about conflict, dissent and criticism in politics, and
* to help make youngsters more realistic consumers of U.S. politics.

Finally, to understand what the cartoonist is portraying, the young people will have to learn the following skills:

* to infer,
* to interpret symbolism,
* to recognize the use of pictorial, graphic conventions,
* to understand subtle visual clues,
* to recognizer analogies, and
* to understand the politic or social events with which the cartoon deals.

APPENDIX

THE EDITORIAL CARTOON

Definition:

An interpretive picture which makes use of symbolism, and, most often, bold and humorous exaggeration to present a message or point of view concerning people, events, or situations. (William Ray Heitzmann)

A graphic way of expressing an idea/opinion relative to an event, person, or another idea or concept.

Qualities of a Good Cartoon:

1. Wit or humor, often obtained by exaggeration, satire, or parody, is is present.
2. Has a basis in truth, including recognizable characters from reality.
3. Possesses a moral purpose/earnestness, leading to universality or permanence.
4. Reflects organic/artistic unit.
5. Quarrels with the status quo of society.

Content:

1. An issue related to an event, or an idea or concept
2. A personality
3. Combination of an issue and a personality.

Purposes of Editorial Cartoons:

1. To criticize intolerance, injustice, political corruption/actions, social evils, etc.
2. To express an opinion, point of view, or reaction.
3. To prick the conscience of the reader.
4. To prod us to laugh at ourselves, our bungling, our biases, our banality, our blindness, or bigotry.

Uses of Editorial Cartoons:

1. To educate
   - A. To help individuals become visually literate.
   - B. To help individuals operate at higher cognitive levels through and critical thinking.
   - C. To teach values clarification.
2. To motivate
3. To entertain

Some Skills Needed for Understanding What the Cartoonist Is Portraying:

1. Ability to infer.
2. Ability to interpret symbolism embedded therein.
3. Ability to recognize use of pictorial/graphic conventions (visual language).
4. Sensitivity to subtle clues inherent in pictorial embellishments.
5. Ability to recognize analogies.

A MODEL FOR INTERPRETING EDITORIAL CARTOONS
An Exercise in Visual Literacy (copyrighted)

An interpretation requires that one:

A. Determine the reality to which the cartoon relates, e.g., person(s), event or happening, place and time.

B. Note pictorial embellishments, considering choices which have been made by the creator and reasons why the choices were made, i.e., their role in the interpretation.

C. Detect and consider the purpose(s) of any pictorial objects/symbols.

D. Recognize and understand the use of any graphic/pictorial conventions used by the cartoonist.

E. Consider how pictorial elements relate to each other and form a relationship which gives meaning to an outside event.

1. Determine the reality to which the cartoon relates.

2. Identify each detail in the cartoon and consider other options which were not chosen by the cartoonist, e.g., rear view rather than a frontal view.

3. What can be inferred from each detail used by the cartoonist?

4. Identify pictorial objects/symbols used and discuss the purpose of each.

5. What cultural/social values are reflected in this cartoon? Or, what opinion is expressed through this cartoon?

6. Are any caricatures or stereotypes present? If so, what are their purposes?

7. If a title has been used, why was it necessary?

8. If there are any legends, why have they been used?

9. What is your personal reaction to the idea/opinion expressed by the cartoonist about the person, event, or happening.

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