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The communication door has been closed long enough

Developing skills with pre-service teachers

By Bruce A. Petty and T. Randall Koetting

"... The little child is permitted to label its drawings 'This is a cow—This is a horse' and so on. This protects the child. It saves it from the sorrow and wrong of hearing its cows and horses criticized as kangaroos and work-benches."

Mark Twain
from a letter to Andrew Lang (1890)

Mark Twain, in this passage, points out to us a crucial element of a fulfilled existence: that each of us has a need to communicate creatively (often visually) and, at the same time, an overpowering need to have our communication efforts be understood by others.

At a time in our history when more messages are being conveyed visually than ever before, when we live in a "visual age," it is unfortunate that so few of us possess the skills either to devise and transmit visual communications or to receive, decode, and comprehend them effectively.

We wish to state at the outset that while sufficient evidence exists to indicate a pressing need for visual communication, we do not mean to imply that it is the only communication device for which one should opt. Neither

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do we believe that the development of skills in visual communication should in any way release one from responsibility for being skillful in written and verbal communications. What is needed is an understanding of the advantages and potentials, and the dangers and limitations of a variety of communication modes.

We reject a concept that has been, and continues to be, broadly conveyed—that intellectual maturity somehow requires a release of dependence upon the senses. We contend with Arnheim that "human thought . . . is a continuum of learning leading without break from the direct apprehension of the physical world to the most rarefied and universal concepts" (Arnheim, 1974a, p. xii).

Those of us who are involved in visual education, if we want to do more than simply use visuals as illustrations of **things** within the teaching-learning event, must concern ourselves with the utilization of visuals as "representations of thoughts in themselves" (Edgar, 1974; Arnheim, 1974b). A true definition of education cannot be limited only to abstract thought any more than it can be limited to a simple training of the senses. Education must be an integral combination of both. Arnheim states that "our educational system is still largely based on this schism. It conceives of the training of the intellect as a freeing of the mind from its sensory resources and considers the arts as an entertainment of vision, hearing, and touch, below the level at which thought begins" (Arnheim, 1974a, p. xii).

While it is certainly possible that the schools are being asked to do too much by and for contemporary society, surely communicating with others effectively may be thought of as a basic topic for study and development within the school structure. Since compulsory school attendance is one of the few common denominators in the total learning process of our people, the schools emerge as a likely arena in which to establish and develop communication skills which are visual, as well as verbal and written. It would then become a responsibility of our universities and colleges of teacher education to provide foundations in visual communications in their pre-service and in-service teacher preparation programs.

We believe it is imperative that teacher education include experiences in which communication through language, signs, and symbols, principles of composition and design in visual presentations, and visual education form topics of discussion and exploration. Teacher educators involved in such activities may find the montage to be a valuable experience for their students.

A montage is a composite visual made by combining several separate pictures. It is the assembling of individual and independent parts to create a new and unified whole.

Recognizing the importance of visual education and the utilization of effective media within the instructional process, our experience with the montage activity has shown that it provides the teacher education student an opportunity to exercise several important skills. It poses a problem of composition and design as the student is faced with manipulating balance (either formal or informal), line (utilitarian or expressive), harmony, unity, color, and juxtaposition. The exercise may also be used as a media production project as the student acquires skills in mounting and heat lamination in order to complete the project.

Effective communication is, of course, the ultimate aim of the montage. Students accustomed to producing

college class work in the form of written or spoken language find themselves faced with the challenge of communicating to an audience through a primarily visual mode. As they complete the procedure, they begin to gain an insight into such effective communication devices as signs and symbolism which can be used in conjunction with, or sometimes in lieu of, language. They discover that in order to communicate effectively they must give considerable thought to their intended audience—their ages, backgrounds, experiences, levels of sophistication, etc. They are given the opportunity to discover that our understanding of what we see is based upon its context of time, place, and culture.

All of this leads quite naturally to students' experiencing the concept of visual literacy. By being asked to create a literate visual statement, they gain an insight into the skills necessary to becoming literate consumers of visuals. The montage provides support to those theoretical concepts which are important in helping young people to **understand** the visual communication process. They begin to recognize that this is the same process used so effectively by professional image-makers (advertising people, public relations experts, etc.) on behalf of everything from cereals to oil companies, from governments to political candidates.

Perhaps most importantly, the activity has a distinct value in that it gives the student an opportunity to be creative. We have found that, although many students experience difficulty getting started in terms of what they want to say and how they want to say it, the end product is generally imaginative and thought provoking.

It is when the montage is viewed within this context that it demonstrates what is, perhaps, its greatest value. Given the mass of information necessary to the pre-service preparation of teachers, and given the short period of time in which to adequately prepare our young people for the classroom, it is not astonishing that there is little room for much creativity—a component crucial to successful teaching.

"Tried and true" is a phrase familiar to all of us. We believe that while many solutions to problems have been "tried," precious few have been found to be consistently "true." Most problem situations prove to be, to some extent, unique. They require creative solutions, and thus creative communications. One of the principles of visual education is that every picture, every work of art, is a statement about some reality. Every visual representation can be considered a statement or proposition which makes "a declaration about the nature of human existence" (Arnheim, 1974b, p. 296).

John Berger (1972, p. 7) states that "it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words but . . . the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."

The montage could, then, be viewed as a statement of an individual student's perceptions of reality and can become the basis for broadening and sharpening those perceptions through critical analysis in the classroom. Ultimately, the practiced ability to encode and decode messages efficiently and effectively via the most appropriate method (verbally or visually) seems to be one of the most creative challenges our students will have to face. We believe the montage to be one method to unlock and open the creative communication door—a door that has been allowed to remain closed long enough.

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