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Visual Literacy and Reading Motivation
Understanding the Impact of Illustrations and Images on an Individual's Engagement with Text

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Abstract

Education systems are currently facing an issue not of illiteracy, but aliteracy due to their emphasis on easily measured and taught content that ultimately removes much of what makes reading relatable and personally rewarding to students. Common Core State Standards, Accelerated Reader, and Hooked on Phonics are examples of measurement heavy programs which emphasize a standardized education that removes the art and connection that comes with literature. Before these programs, visuals have been intertwined with literature in various forms for centuries. Theater, the film, or even architecture has an important ability to create an immersive experience which connects its viewers to the content. Reading motivation is largely hinged upon this immersive experience as internal motivations such as emotional/personal connections/curiosity are better indicators of whether students will actually read both assigned and unassigned texts. Images also make it easier to understand the content of the reading as we are inherently more fluent in reading images due to seeing them more frequently. Due to this fluency, less effort is required to pull meaning from a text with images than a text without and readers may find they need less motivation to get through. Previous studies have shown that not only do children better understand and remember texts with images, but these trends are consistent throughout many grade levels. By reinserting images into commonplace texts, educators may find an increase in reading motivation as the visual stimulation is not only more similar to what students are used to and therefore more relatable, but it can also help bridge any gaps in reading comprehension.

Introduction

When I was in elementary school, I remember being applauded for how much I was reading. In particular, I remember being praised for the rate at which I was reading *chapter* books. To us, the stages of reading were simple. First, picture books where little animated characters or small illustrations would crutch a reader along in understanding the story, and then as a child matured, they left the pictures behind and learned to read chapter books. I distinctly recall being proud of this achievement, and that my peers and I quickly picked up the habit of announcing loudly to the entire classroom when we had finished a book that had absolutely no pictures. What we didn't know at the time was that for many of us there would be yet another stage in our progression of learning to read: stop reading entirely.

The switch was not instantaneous, and in reality, no one actually spoke the command “stop reading.” In fact, our teachers pressured us to do the opposite. Yet, as our grade levels progressed, and classroom curriculums became more intensive, we quickly learned what was important and what was not. Weekly visits to the school library petered out. The teacher's classroom libraries that we had become so accustomed to continuously mitigated until they too were nonexistent. Gradually, access to books exited our lives, and with it so did our motivation to read for pleasure— or even for class— slowly slip away.

This experience is not unique to me. A study done by the National Literacy Trust revealed that in 2019, only 53% of children and young adults enjoyed reading, and even less read daily (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2020). In the meantime, for those who do report reading for pleasure, the time they devote to reading has fallen by more than 30% between 2004 and 2017. The reading crisis has been apparent for decades now as NEA data shows independent reading has been on the decline since at least the 1980's (Ingraham 2021). Not coincidentally, this is

around the same time that television started becoming widespread across the United States. Audio and visual media was suddenly able to provide all the endless information and entertainment could ask for. Then, a few years later as social media took off, the average person found themselves with access to infinite connectedness to others and infinite scrolling to new and visually stimulating items (Pettman 2016). Ultimately, the culture of independent reading of traditional literature couldn't keep up, and slowly it fell by the wayside both inside and outside the classroom (Saden 2014).

However, as easy as blaming digital media might be, it is not simply an issue of short attention spans and poor work ethic on the part of the student. After all, current reading programs in the classroom are set up to place an emphasis on scientific and other analytical texts which ask students to find the answer and point it out rather than tease out an opinion of their own (Ingraham 2021). Paired with the wide variety of information which is already broken down and more easily consumable available at anyone's fingertip, this trend in teaching leads one to be less willing to put hours of work into reading something that could be learned in ten minutes of google searches, or covered in an hour of lecture the next day. Instead, a student must be able to find the intrinsic willingness to continue reading something as the extrinsic award—the grade—is mostly unaffected. Unfortunately, the intrinsic value of reading has been equally—if not more so—affected by current and historical classroom policies.

One of the more important works that shaped the current American educational system is John Crowe Ransom's manifesto, *The New Criticism* (1941). The essay dives into Ransom's beliefs that the traditional method of teaching literature, and thus by extension, teaching critical thought, is flawed. He believed that there was no way to become a master of literature not because there was no correct answer, but because no one had yet determined the path to make

literary criticism “more scientific, or precise and systematic” (Ransom 1941). In turn, Ransom then went on to say that proper literary criticism should exclude any sort of material which is largely subjective and not directly related to the text as it takes only a piece of what should be understood in larger context. This includes:

- Any sort of personal impression which would indicate how the reader felt about or related to a text
- Any paraphrasing of the plot
- Anything historical of the background of the author
- Identifying any meanings or allusions behind the words on the page
- Moral content or
- Anything else which might remove a piece and try to understand it separate from the whole.

In general, much of Ransom’s manifesto is focused on the reading of poetry; however, he applies many of these same rules to prose also and asks that the reader considers all literature only through “the words on the page” (Mambrol 2018).

While this manifesto has received much attention over the years, some common criticism of his work is that Ransom leaves no room for the individual to relate or make their own meaning (Mambrol 2018). Instead, readers are once again taught that the best way to read a text is to simply look at a very surface level and point to the page to find the correct answer. If readers are asked to think more deeply about a subject, it is often through a series of set “critical lenses” which offer a uniform way to relate a text to an experience in the real world without bringing the “bias” of an individual into the study. The manifesto also refocuses that the point of understanding literature is the acquisition of a certain amount of knowledge and the ability to

regurgitate this knowledge as opposed to growing in the personal or social realm. Not only does this focus limit the ways that individuals can correctly engage with literature, but it also limits why an individual should be engaging with these texts in the first place.

Still, altering the reasoning behind why and how a student *should* be engaging with a text fails to change what makes students actually read. That is to say that students do not care to simply acquire knowledge for no reason and will not read without feeling that the task is directly relevant to their lives and/or related to a specific interest of theirs (Gambrell 2011). More so, with Ransom's *New Criticism*, the ability to warp material to make it relevant to a student's life is limited. So ultimately Ransom's focus is largely on the need to learn to read correctly and, to a certain extent, gate-keep the academic world is actually so successful that it changes a large part of the problem that the education system is handling today.

The United States is not currently facing widespread illiteracy— the inability to read— as much as it is aliteracy— having the ability to read but choosing not to (Wood 2015). The difference between these two definitions is huge. We are not facing a population who is not reading because they don't have the ability or the resources to learn— although individuals in this position do exist within the borders of the United States and it is a problem worthy of attention. Rather, in this essay, we are facing a population who often refuses to practice and improve their reading ability because they don't see the value.

Still, it is not as though students are failing classes more frequently and openly not reading. Instead, students are doing what students have done for generations. They are finding ways to cheat the system. The only catch is it is now easier than ever to find summaries of texts online or look up previously written papers and copy and paste their ideas into a new document (Amzalag et al. 2022). This is not to put the fault of stagnant readers onto the internet, but rather

to say if the internet offers a faster and more easily consumed version of the information that already does all the hard thinking for the individual reader, why would going through the extra work of doing it for oneself be worth the effort? Especially when that effort adds little to nothing to the individual's experience in the real world and may even come at the sacrifice of other academic or social standings.

In other words, the real issue at hand for today's educators is how do we get students to become readers? And how do we make sure that this motivation remains lifelong and doesn't stop with the end of promises of external rewards? While many solutions to these questions might exist, one could be the reintroduction of image into the written word.

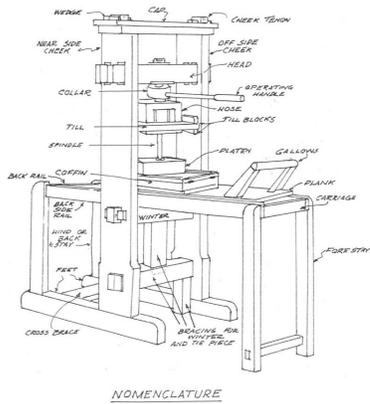
After all, it is not as if images in written texts are new by any means. In 868 AD, the block printer was used to create the seventeen and a half foot long scroll of sacred Buddhist text called, *The Diamond Sutra*. Not only is this text believed to be the first book ever printed, but it was also beautifully imbued with a detailed image illustrating much of the



story of the scroll itself: a conversation¹ between the Buddha's pupil, Subhati, and his master. With each copy of the scroll, a copy of the image came with it. The image, even though expensive and difficult to recreate, is seen as an integral part of the story itself. They helped not only tell the story to those who could not read, they were actively a part of the story as they engaged the reader and prompted responses (Daley 2016).

Images from (Unknown, *Diamond Sutra*, 868)

In the western world, prior to the fifteenth century, images in Europe were largely unique as before the modern printing press; each image, no matter its form or placement, had to be individually created by hand. However, in 1450 Johannes Gutenberg had perfected his own version of the printing press allowing for the mass reproduction of the written idea (History.com



Editors 2018). Even with the invention of the Gutenberg Press, images remained difficult and expensive to reprint. The matrices that had to have been carved in order to print them were not as versatile and were much more intricate than the basic text. That is to say not only were they more difficult to make, but they were also harder to justify (Thompson 2003). Consequently, images remained largely absent in common place prints and were often reserved for decoration or for special editions. Interestingly, this perception of images as decorative or unnecessary has carried over to today so that even now, in a world complete with high speed and fully colored laser printers, many forms of images and illustrations are seen as either “the domain of the elite, or the immature” (Christianakis 2011; Kress et al. 1996).^{2 3}



Still, even in children’s literature—the mostly easily argued “immature” genre—the images are often included in order to hold the young reader’s attention span longer by giving them extra visual stimuli. In addition, the illustrations often help the young reader keep track of

² Printing Press Image from (Unknown. *Gutenberg press model*, 2006)
³ Printing Form Image from (Miller & Richard of Edinburgh, *untitled*, Circa 1900).

the story as it acts as a sort of narrative bridge and fills in what normal reading comprehension cannot. Readers are, of course, expected to grow out of this need for visual aids as they age. However, studies have shown that as the brain develops, it doesn't develop from a pictorial basis to a verbal basis; rather, in language, images are foundational to understanding (Christianakis 2011). Thus, by introducing an image to a text, not only is a reader more likely to understand and remember the content of the piece, but the multimodal engagement that an image and text pairing creates allows opportunity for a deeper conceptualization of literary themes and additional construction of individual connections to literature (Smith 2019).

It is also important to note that today's students have grown up in a world that is largely pictorial. Films, T.V. shows, and social media have flooded the market not only with infinite distractions but with infinite imaging. By including images and teaching students how to engage with them on an academic level, teachers could not only be returning to a long used method of holding attention, increasing comprehension, and eliciting emotional responses, but they may also be appealing to the personal life of the student and what is most familiar to them.

Due to their emphasis on easily measured and taught content and deemphasis on the individual, education systems are currently facing an issue not of illiteracy, but aliteracy. Common Core State Standards, Accelerated Reader, and Hooked on Phonics are examples of measurement heavy programs which emphasize a standardized education that removes the art and connection that comes with literature. Before these programs, visuals have been intertwined with literature in various forms for centuries. Theater, the film, or even architecture has an important ability to create an immersive experience which connects its viewers to the content. Reading motivation is largely hinged upon this immersive experience as internal motivations such as emotional/personal connections/curiosity are better indicators of whether students will

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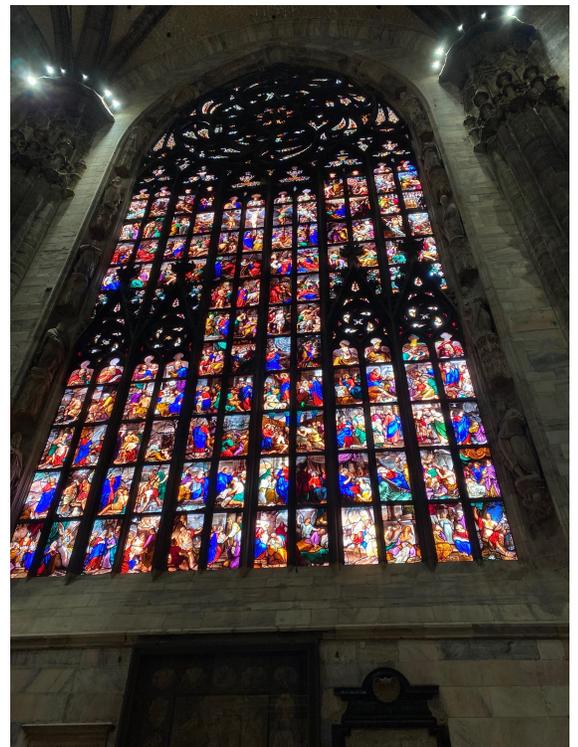
The Visual Art Inherent in Literacy

As mentioned earlier, images have worked hand in hand with literacy for centuries. In particular, verbal communication and their accompanying images— or vice versa— often are seen as their own type of artwork that are uniquely combined in order to generate their own spark of emotion or connection within a viewer, listener, or reader.



In fact, for thousands of years, various religions around the world have constructed massive churches, synagogues, or mosques, in order to reflect what it is that they believe. In the realm of the Catholic Church specifically, breathtaking cathedrals were designed to have massive heights

in order to draw the attendee's eyes up to God. In addition, in a time where many churchgoers may not be literate, huge stained glass windows depicted bible stories so that all could learn the stories of Christ without having to be able to read. This not only helped the average citizen stay informed and active within the church, but the visual stimulus in line with the cadence of the speaker's voice and the music from the accompanying organ often provided enough of an ambiance that attending mass was able to follow along with the message whether or not they understood the Latin or the complicated



parables being told (Thomason 2022). In other words, attending services was more than just an act of obedience to religious culture. It was an immersive experience which used both verbal and visual experiences to call the individual to connect critically and learn something, but to also connect spiritually and emotionally. Members were to leave changed in some way.

Theater has had a long history of functioning similarly. During the 17th century, when Shakespeare himself would put on his plays in the Globe Theater, the common folk in the audiences would often not be literate. Rather, audiences were completely dependent on understanding from the spoken word and the visual movement of the actors across the stage. The rhythm of the words— whether they were prose or poetry— worked in part with the physical presentation of the characters to indicate to the audience their class or sometimes even their magical ability without ever having to spell it out. Even to this day when Shakespeare plays are reimagined on the stage again, much time and thought is put into how the stage is lit, the gender of the actor who plays each individual character, how the characters are dressed, and what the props on the stage look like. In some cases, directors might even ask whether the characters should stay on the stage or if they should move closer to the audience somehow. And if so, to what degree should they allow the audience’s response to affect the story on the stage.⁴

The effect of such an experience is often transformative as the lines between two worlds— the fictional and the factual— blur



⁴ Image from (Bartlett, J., *untitled*, 2012)

together. It generates a break from reality and allows a viewer a moment of emotional escapism, but it also often asks viewers to reflect on the social landscape they find themselves in when they return to reality. Is there a societal norm that suddenly doesn't feel so normal? Is there an outcast which suddenly feels hypocritical? Has a divide between two people suddenly gotten larger or has it gotten smaller? Even if the spoken words in the play very rarely change from production to production, the visual effects are enough to change the entire meaning of the play.

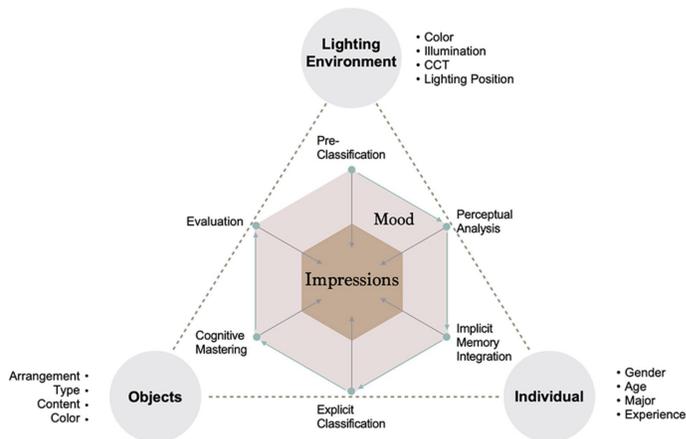
Interestingly within the classroom, so much of this visual element is lost. Theater in the classroom is often not watched, but for the sake of convenience, lack of resources, or time constraints, it is read. Little booklets of the written play are passed out to students and students are asked to read and understand the plot and meaning behind the play without hearing the words, or seeing the stage directions acted out on stage. In many cases, these plays are often taught specifically because the language in them is a little difficult and it forces students to work hard to understand the meaning of words from the context. For this reason, characters become both flat and unable to be unrelatable due to the robotic format of the text, but also deeply convoluted as their language can be perceived as unapproachable. Consequently, this emphasis on the word and deemphasis from the visuals makes the entire work unapproachable, outdated, and ultimately not worth the work to the student (Hoyt 1992).

Even more common within the classroom in the realm of visuals is the film. When films are shown in the classroom, they are often used as a sort of reward or mental break to students after finishing a reading unit. While this method of teaching film as an extended version of the novel is effective in making sure students remember a text longer and perhaps acts as an external motivator to get students to read more, it also has shown that students are more likely to remember the "false" or "inaccurate" information in a film than they are to remember the

accurate version in the novel. This effect is lessened when students were informed to watch out for inaccuracies, but still, not everything was caught. Thus, teaching film as its own art form is important rather than just using it as a moment to disengage in the classroom (Muller 2006).



After all, the film follows much of the same plot devices that a novel does; however, it has the same benefit that a play does in that it is inherently visual. Not only do directors have the ability to play with dialogue, character development, plot points, and other typical crafts found in the novel, but the film can also make use of lighting, music, and camera angles to influence a



way that a viewer understands a scene. In other words, the film has the ability to emphasize the importance of both how the viewer/reader response is shaped by the text, but also “how the text is created to shape our reactions” (Pirie 1997). In addition, students

⁵ Image of Faces and Lighting (Renee, V., *Untitled*, 2017)

⁶ Lighting Diagram from (Xie, X., *Figure 1*, 2022)

are, on average, more likely to be motivated to write about a film than they are a book because the average American is spending more than ten hours a day getting information and entertainment from a multimedia source like film (Muller 2006). Students are inherently interested in the content because the method of delivery is more similar and relevant to the lives they live (Gambrell 2011).

Even in texts which do not contain explicitly visual artwork, many classics still utilize the essence of visuals in order to capture the reader's attention. The tableaux is originally a term referring to what could be considered essentially a freeze frame of a deeply visual and evocative scene in a play's plot. A good tableau would compel its audience to reflect back on the path which led the character to this moment while also considering the impact of the choice that now lies ahead. The difference between a stage tableau and a novel tableau is that the novel tableau actually has no physical image. It is simply narration: a written image. However, this is not to say that it isn't as effective. The novel tableaux forces readers into a moment of active reading as they now must piece together the clues to decode and visualize the entire scene as one moment. Similar to the stage tableau, it also offers pause in a drama wrought plot which gives readers an opportunity to reflect. In the words of Wiet, "the more intricate and dense a tableau is, the more a tableau promises the revelation of knowledge yet delays the process of transforming opacity into clarity" (Wiet 2019).

Essentially, what is discovered within the novel tableau is that even without the actual physical presence of an image, readers crave the immersion effect of one. Readers want the moment to pause and reflect, or perhaps a chance to take in minuscule details from the scenery and see how they interact with the characters at hand. This sort of active reading allows the reader to insert themselves into the story and decide how each element not only affects the

character, but affects themselves. Ultimately, this creates a stronger bridge of empathy between the reader and the content at hand.

Still, the problem with this sort of imagery is that it lacks the actual image. The reader must work much harder in order to piece together the individual descriptions and create an image in their head than if the image were simply put in front of them. In addition, these texts can take a long time to read carefully. So while the novel tableau still forces a student to practice important reading skills, the student will still often not partake as they can skip over the large chunk of text instead to get through the reading quicker. Thus, they not only miss the beauty inherent in the reading, but they miss the critical moment of pause, reflection, and consideration that is crucial to the emotional immersion of the work.

Ultimately, while it is easy to see— and measure— the benefits of reader comprehension and improved memory, the true key to motivating students once more is rediscovering the emotional connection both to the story and to learning. Each of these mediums, whether it be architecture, the tableaux, theater, or film serve this need to fully immerse oneself in a world and find a connection to it. They encourage a sort of conversation in which the reader/viewer's very presence impacts the story making the engagement of that individual not only important, but crucial. However, just like the aesthetics of art go in and out of style as society transitions from one stage to another, so do our preferences in the way we receive a story. Still, no form of media— no matter its benefits or drawbacks— can replace the importance of the written word on a page, our ability to read it, understand it, and use it for communication. Rather, the importance of looking at each of these mediums actually comes from the recognition of the human willingness— and even innate desire— to connect with something and be a part of something through art. So the question is not is it time to move on because reading has simply become

outdated, but rather how do we get our students to engage with reading again, and how does the reinstallation of artwork into the art of reading forge this connection?

The Relationship between Reading and Motivation

Before we can go into how to increase reading motivation, we first must understand what it is that gets people to read in the first place. After all, as mentioned previously, the problem that the United States is facing right now is aliteracy, and it is not simply because students refuse to practice. Rather, reading has become unappealing in the eyes of both students and the generalized public. Part of this phenomenon could be due to students simply being overworked in other areas. In my own experience, coming home from high school often meant hours of math and science homework that left little to no time for reading a book that would have no larger impact on my life beyond the reading quiz coming the next day. Part of this phenomenon could be due to the convenience and multitasking that other formats such as audiobooks allow. But a portion could also be due to students wanting to use their free time to engage with media that is going to keep them culturally relevant and able to engage in pop culture conversations with their peers and much of this content came from movies, TV shows, or social media platforms as opposed to printed books. Still, it is not as though the written word has phased out all together. So how is it that people find value in reading? And how can we try to implement that value in the classroom?

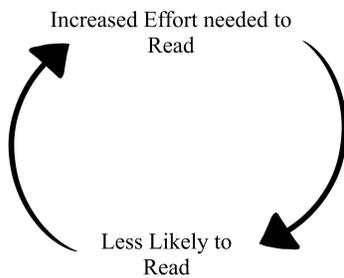
There are many different ways to “motivate” a student and many studies try to split up this understanding into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations where extrinsic motivations are defined as “reasons for reading that are external to the activity of reading” and intrinsic motivations are defined as “the willingness to read because the activity itself is regarded as satisfying or rewarding” (Schaffer et al. 2013). Schaffer takes these definitions a step further though, arguing that reading motivation is more than this, and pulling from Wigfield and Guthrie’s definitions (1997) argue that it is in fact made up of seven core dimensions:

1. Curiosity: To learn more about topics of one's interest
2. Involvement: To get lost in a story or experience imaginative actions
3. Competition: To reach higher levels of school achievement, particularly in reading, than other students
4. Recognition: To get praise for good reading performance
5. Grades: To improve one's grades in school
6. Compliance: Reading because of external pressure
7. Work avoidance: Trying to avoid reading-related work

In Schaffer's descriptions of motivations, each of these seven core dimensions can be split up and placed either within an external motivation (for example: competition as it hinges upon either an external reward of doing well or external consequence of doing poorly) or an internal motivation (for example: curiosity as it relates specifically to the individual reader's preferences for what is interesting). He discovered, as he suspected, that internal motivations are stronger indicators of reading ability.

However, his study does not fully unpack the interconnected nature between the two within the modern context where the internet and other resources are easily accessed. Returning to the example of competition— if a school is hosting a reading competition and asks students to take a test proving they read each book they claim to have completed, a student who is externally motivated by the prize can easily achieve that prize without the work by going online and googling summaries of each text they are claiming to have read. In fact, they may even be able to find videos explaining the book in a condensed version, thus they don't even have to read the summary. After all, why put in all the time and effort into reading a text when the same reward can be achieved with less effort (Strom et al. 2007). In the meantime, a student who is internally motivated to do the reading with or without the prize will actually do the reading because the content itself is more rewarding.

In other words, while Schaffer’s understanding of reading motivations might be important when trying to understand the very basics of what best motivates a student to engage, it does not fully begin to unpack the lack of willful reading whether it is personal or assigned. Rather, educators must take the time to ask themselves what is lowering the internal motivation to read so much that increasing extrinsic motivations cannot make up for it? And how do we address this issue?



The first question may be answered with something that many educators already work with on a daily basis: student effort. The lower a person’s “reading level” is, the more effort is required of them to read. The more effort required of a person to read, the more motivation they need to read. The cycle is fairly simple and, unfortunately, easy to get trapped in. As of 2006, more than eight million students

between the 4th and 12th grades were below reading level, and if a student falls behind in reading levels— as clearly many do— they have to work much harder to catch up (NCES 2009). However, as addressed later, many students decide that effort is simply not worth it because they do not believe it will help them develop personally or professionally, and the same grades can be achieved through various forms of cheating (Franklyn-Stokes, A. et al. 1995). This attitude only leads to the student falling farther behind meaning it is even less likely for them to put in the effort in the future to catch up.

Even with an increase in emphasis in teaching reading competency within the classroom, seniors in high school are still not reading as well as they need to be. Still, seniors are not reporting that they feel unprepared for college. On the contrary, more than ever, seniors are

claiming they feel confident in their ability to read and understand college level material even though the average senior will not read longer than twenty minutes for any particular assignment. In addition, the problem only exaggerates as students work with expository works of literature like fiction as opposed to technical work like research papers. After all, why struggle to understand a work of fiction in which themes are hidden and understanding must be teased out when the answers are going to be given through lecture the next day anyway? In the mind of the student, academia is quickly becoming a game of minimum work required and in an effort to make sure students continue on in education and pass their classes, teachers and administration alike are lowering their standards to accommodate (Hooley et al. 2013).⁷

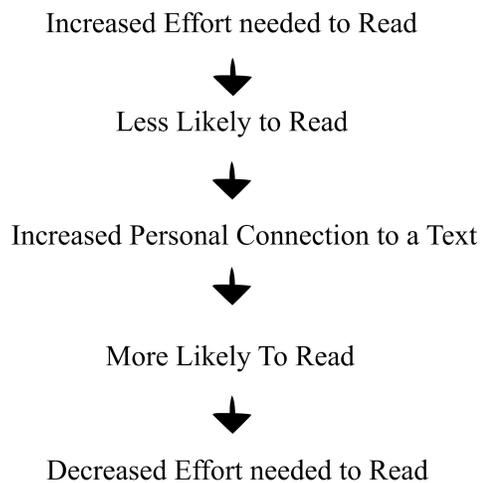


However, not all teachers are simply lowering their standards to pass a class or teaching through lecture what should have been learned through independent reading. Instead, some teachers are introducing independent reading time to students within class. They use this time to encourage students to pick up books that are not necessarily required for class, but that are interesting to the individual. In addition, the quiet time gives students space to ask questions or to

⁷ Image from (Calhoun, T., *untitled*, 2018)

visit the school library. Interestingly, of the teachers who used these practices, many reported that giving students space to move and make noise was important as very few students have the capability to simply sit still, stare at the page, and absorb information passively. The students were encouraged to move around the room or within their desk and make noise as long as it was respectful to those around them. This simple shift permitted students to have in the moment emotional and physical reactions to whatever text they were engaging with similar to an audience in a movie theater physically reacting in the form of gasps, flinches, or tears to the film they are watching. The extra physical engagement helps viewers and readers alike sink deeper into the world they are observing, helping them relate more directly to the text (Saden et al. 2014).

This brings us to the second question: how do we address this problem of reading motivation? In order to decrease the amount of effort a student would have to put in to read, they have to practice more. Even with the addition of images which may decrease the amount of effort they need to exert in order to understand the text, they still have to have enough motivation to begin the process. This may be able to be done through an increase in personal connection. Research shows that emotional awareness and affective feedback are both extremely important factors in how students process information and perform within the classroom (Calvo & D’Mello, 2010). In one study when students were split into two groups where one group was educated on emotional awareness and given strategies to both cope and communicate before a lesson and one was not, the students who were given the emotional awareness training were significantly



more motivated and engaged in their learning as well as significantly better at self regulation. In addition to this, students who received the training were also better able to communicate their feelings to their teachers and thus were able to receive better and more specific feedback and care (Arguedas 2016). While this research was done with student motivation within the classroom in general, the same holds true for reading motivations. Put simply, the emotions an individual feels while working in the classroom or with reading material matters.

The more directly a student can connect with a piece, the more likely they are to find it is worth reading it (Wigfield 1997, Gambrell 2011). In order for something to constitute a personal connection, it has to have some sort of direct correlation to or effect on the way that an individual reader understands or relates to their world. On the flip side, a personal connection can also directly relate to one of the reader's interests, hobbies, or outside activities. The personal connection an individual has with a piece does not have to look in any way uniform to the way another person connects with a piece. However, the personal connection does have to create some amount of emotional rise within the individual that will help them better understand themselves, the world they live in, or something that they hold interest in.

Many sociocultural perspectives— a critical lens which requires its readers to consider the social and cultural aspects of both the author and the reader when analyzing a text— on reading assume that examining the contexts of an individual's life is equally as important to understanding and advancing an individual's ability to read. For example, Francois did a study on one small and underfunded school system and found that this school, against all odds and contrary to the patterns of the other schools in the area, was doing exceptionally well on its reading test scores. After looking into what was causing this, Francois outlined that students were doing well not just because their teachers worked extra hard to model good reading habits,

but because they also provided students with texts that helped students understand their own lives and that the readers then fed into this, looking to read and understand more because it was helpful and fulfilling to them. The author found that students enjoyed reading books that helped them discover more about their own identities, and that while reading is— on a technical level— a private act, it is incredibly influential to how we relate to one another.

This sociocultural perspective on literacy helps us see that reading develops through interaction with the environment and not through skill-focused strategies alone. Thus, literacy is not formed singularly through the definition of the ability to read, but also it can act as a sort of identity in that “who is and who is not a reader, the purposes of reading, the texts that are valued, and even what counts as reading” all play into our engagement with ourselves as well as others around us (Francois 2013). Just as the desire to be a part of an “adult community” inspires young kids to read books without pictures, we can respark the desire to read by showing there is a continued form of community for every individual in the literary world.

Unfortunately, creating these connections and forging a concept of identity in the classroom can be difficult as not all educators have the time or the resources to let students have a large chunk of class time for independent reading and library visits. In addition, because the definition of a personal connection is so diverse, finding what one student connects to might totally miss another student especially when individual reading levels come back into play. What one student is capable of reading might be impossible for another student to understand. So educators must navigate both of these areas of reading motivation at the same time and put them in conversation with one another in order to put a stop to the growing aliteracy problem in our country. In order to do this, we must first understand have a deeper understanding of what literacy is.

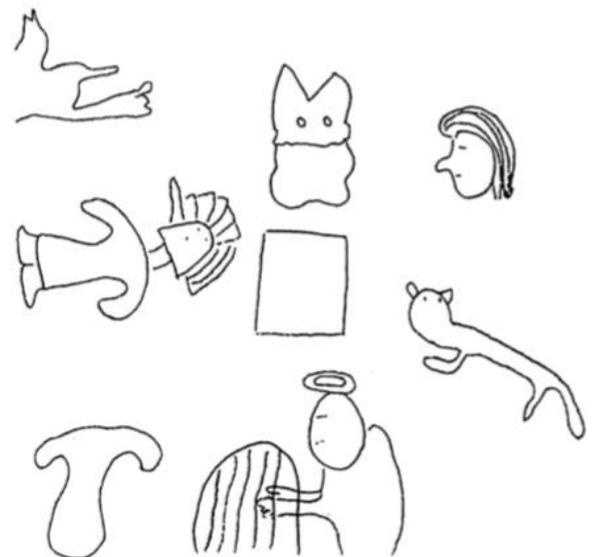
Literacy and Visual Literacy

The Foundations of Verbal Language

Literacy in the past has often been defined as one’s ability to “understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (U.S. Department of Education NCES 2019). However, this is not entirely accurate as the definition emphasizes literacy as an ability that a reader has or does not have. It also only includes the use of written text as if other forms of communication are not equally valuable. Rather, literacy is better described as a “process of using reading, writing, and oral language to extract, construct, integrate, and critique meaning through interaction and involvement with multimodal texts in the context of social situated practices” (Frankel 2016). In other words, Frankel suggests literacy is not just the singular skill of reading, but rather a multitude of skills which are integral to our ability to know and understand society and ourselves. It is also a process which allows readers to take in new information and process it through any number of lenses including their own social contexts, allowing them to directly interact and become involved with it. ⁸

Images work hand in hand with written language. In fact, one of the ways drawing “facilitates the shift to writing” is that drawing seems to serve as an inspiration for young writers (Giorgis 1999). Stories, descriptions, and definitions all frequently blossom from something seen or drawn (Calkins 1986;

In the middle is a box with paper in it. Around it are lots of spirits from different places and animals and people. Spirit is also in your heart and your head. These spirits make the piece of art.
Douglas, age 10



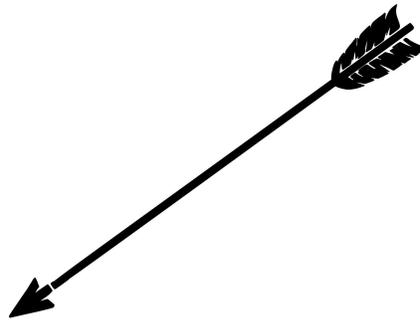
⁸ Image from (Giorgis, *untitled drawn by Douglas*, 1999)

Graves 1983). However, drawings can also act as “transitional support” to help individuals maintain a stream of ideas (DuCharme 1990). Specifically, stories can fill in gaps where new writers are struggling to find words to explain a complex story. Doodling or sketching out an idea might also help someone visualize and find new or better descriptions for whatever it is they are trying to write.

However, while the belief that our brains develop from a pictorial base to a verbal one is common, it is still misdirected. Of course, we might be able to look at our school systems and observe a child transition from a blank sheet of paper, to wide ruled, to college ruled notebooks, but the increased line space and decreased space for open drawing does not actually indicate how the brain develops. Rather, it simply shows the pattern that our society generally follows in developing language. Just as languages historically move from images, gestures, and speech to an alphabetic language, so do we limit the blank space on a page, so that our children outgrow “the infantile form of communication” that is drawing, and move into the much more mature and intelligent writing (Kress et al. 1996). However, many studies suggest that “young children use drawings to both mediate social interactions around writing” as well as relate their own writing alongside popular media (Dyson, 1993, 1997, 2003; Kamberelis, 1999). In this way, writing and drawing are not unconnected. Instead, drawing is “foundational” in our communication with one another. (Christianakis 2011).

This is important as we recall the history of visual arts and its relationship with literacy. Within the classroom, we may think we are furthering our students ability to read, understand, and communicate by having them focus on the physical words in front of them and the words alone; however, that is only the tip of the iceberg of human communication. In Vygotsky’s writing, he discusses that there are layers to communication. The first order would be gestures,

speech and drawing whereas the second would be that which is more abstract like alphabetic writing (Vygotsky 1978). This seems counterintuitive in a lot of ways as we frequently think of written, alphabetic language as more specific and clearly laid out; however, consider the difference between the written word “arrow,” and this image:



The image might be referring to a real physical arrow somewhere, but it is not representative in the same way that the written word is. The image, after all, is able to stand for itself and while two-dimensional, is the object that it is referring to. However, the written word “arrow” is actually made up of subjective letters that have assigned sound and meaning so when they are put together, they refer to the object. Thus, while they can be definitive and descriptive, they are not necessarily intuitive in the same way that a drawing can be.

For many, this is simply a silent and intrinsic recognition, and words are only applied within the realm of the elite artists (Christianakis 2011). Likewise, so many images that are not seen as worth the analysis because they are seen as childish or for nothing but entertainment. For example, films, images, TikTok’s, Instagram reels, comic books, graphic novels, and so much more are inhaled at massive rates, yet they are not seen as inherently adding to one’s ability to read and thus they are not seen as academic. However, with an expanded definition of literacy and understanding of how we can read images just as we can read words, it becomes apparent that visual literacy is not additive, but instead foundational to literacy. In fact, visual literacy is

actually defined as “the ability to interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image” (Powers et al. 2020). In other words, our ability to understand images is actually just an extended form of literacy.

Learning to Read

Reading is not synonymous with literacy, but reading— images as well as words— is central to literacy. Reading, according to the RAND Reading Study Group (2002), is “the process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Frankel et al. 2016). This means that while literacy might involve multimodal forms like written, visual, or oral communications, reading is much more focused on the text and the activity itself. In addition, it is important to note that the skill of reading still requires attention to broader sociocultural contexts that the reading occurs through. So if we learn to be more literate through engagement with multimodal media and conversation with others, how do we learn to read? And if visual literacy is possible, is reading an image also possible?

When learning to read the English language, the average individual goes through four different stages. The first stage is the Pre-Alphabetic stage where the individual attempts to translate the unfamiliar visual cues in the physical letters into familiar oral language. This stage has a lot of crossover and confusion between words because they might associate the sharp point of an “A” with the word “arrow,” but then every other word that has the letter A will also be understood as Arrow. In the second stage, the Partial-Alphabetic stage, readers learn letters and sounds are related, but they don’t understand how to blend sounds together so they mostly focus on only the first and final letters as clues to what the word might mean. The problem with this is words that start and end with the same letter such as book, brook, and back are then easily

confused and difficult to distinguish from one another. It isn't until the third stage, the fully alphabetic stage, that readers begin to think about sounds for each of the individual letters and begin to blend them together to understand how to pronounce a word. However, this slow process of looking at each individual letter and deriving a meaningful sound from it is mentally taxing as well as time consuming.

Thus, the fourth stage of reading, the consolidated alphabetic stage, is the key to fluency. Fluency is defined as “efficient and effective word recognition that permits a reader to construct meaning from a text” and is “manifested in accurate rapid, expressive oral reading” that can then be applied to make silent reading possible (Pikulski et al 2005). Therefore, when a reader reaches the fourth stage, they can instantly identify words and store them as whole units in their memory. This skill allows them to recognize patterns as word parts which helps for quicker, and less exhausting, reading. Consistent practice in the fourth stage yields fluent readers. In this stage, the reader can recognize patterns as word parts which helps for quicker reading through the ability to identify words and store them as whole units in their memory (Pikulski et al 2005).

While no clear four stages are outlined in our process of reading images— afterall many images have a much more subjective meaning and thus cannot be clearly defined in the same way— there is still an ability to become fluent in reading them. Though it is important to note that the definition for fluency must be shifted as it refers to images. Images do not require effective word recognition nor are they manifested by an oral reading. This is because the very parts that make up an image are different from the parts which make up a word. Where words in the English language are made of letters which are mostly made of lines, pictures are also composed of other bits of artistic choice we, inherently, learn to pull apart.

Consider if you were to break the following image down into its basic parts:



It is, at its core, a sketch of an older man sitting in a chair. But if students were to look closer, they would notice the sketch is made up of hundreds of small lines. Lines in a drawing can act in many ways. In part, they can create borders. A dark, heavy line can illustrate a firm boundary, or perhaps in the case of this drawing, a dark shadow or an empty space. However, lines can also illustrate movement. Notice the excess of lines around the bend of the knee, and at the crown of the hat. Even though the old man is still, his clothing has movement as it creases with the folds of his body or moves in hypothetical wind. Heavier line weight can draw the eye to what is important, whereas a decrease in line weight can emphasize empty space or something smooth.

Adding color can make the piece more emotionally evocative. Red is frequently associated with negative attributes or aggression, but other warm tones can bring senses of peace and tranquility. Due to the fact that blue color waves travel farther than red waves, cool tones can, on the other hand, frequently make a piece feel more isolated and far away. There is also the question of whether or not an artist chooses to include color at all, or if there is color, the intensity at which it is present.



The perspective the artist chooses to take while drawing this image is also equally important. How far away is the viewer from the subject in the image? The closer the subject, the more intimate it might be. The farther away, the more isolated. Perspective is also interesting as it allows the viewer to see the image exactly as the artist sees it. Or perhaps even the medium that an artist chooses to use to create their image can help generate the exact feeling that the artist is trying to demonstrate. After all, textures, composition, design, technique, and much more are other things an artist might take into account while creating a visual piece (Giorgis 1999).

Overall, reading an image functions very differently from reading words. A word is imbued with a specific definition and is a reference to a concept or item. An image is what it is referring to. However, an image like words can still be broken down into its parts and while those parts do not have assigned sounds or specific meanings, they can draw out specific emotional responses. It is only after we learn to recognize those different parts, name them, and have critical conversations surrounding them that we can become more visually literate.

Examples of Reading Images

As mentioned previously, so much of this is recognized and felt without conscious thought. In general, individuals do not learn in the classroom how to read lines to recognize shadows or see the flow of movement in a fabric, just as they do not need to learn that warm tones have a different effect than cool tones. For the able bodied individual, sight is one of the five senses and therefore it doesn't feel like something that needs to be "honed" or "practiced." In theory, we should be naturally good at it, and in some ways, we are. In other ways, it is not natural at all and rather it is highly practiced. After all, every day we walk around, using our sight and our understanding of our social situations to pull meaning out of what is around us. We see folds in clothing in real life and learn to recognize that it is because of the bends of our body or the movement from the wind. We see bright colors around summer and learn to associate them with warmth. We see dim colors around winter and learn to associate them with the cold.

We also have subconscious emotional responses to certain visual cues. For example, researchers have shown that the color red is implicitly associated with anger, failure, potency, and danger as it interacts with our fight or flight response (Kurt et al. 2014). Extended studies have shown that athletes who compete in red are, on average, more likely to win than those who compete in blue (Mentzel et al. 2017). However, it is not as easy as seeing red makes testosterone levels rise and thus make an individual more aggressive. Instead, according to the color-in-context theory, "the influence of colors depends on the context of the environment" (Elliot and Maier 2012). In other words, we take in our visual surroundings and process it in conjunction with our previous experiences, the larger cultural context we are in, and other stimulation from our other senses to form our complete understanding of whatever it is we are seeing and respond accordingly. Art thus opens up a greater opportunity to engage with this

larger cultural context and make a piece not only easier to understand from a transitional language standpoint, but more relatable from a personal standpoint.

One example of this can be seen within emojis. These pictograms are small characters, doodles, and drawings that have progressed from being the occasional smiling face to pretty much anything you could imagine. Throughout the years as they've developed, evolved, and grown in number, researchers have pondered the question about whether or not they were not a



new language entirely. After all, so many of these little symbols can be strung together without the assistance of words entirely and still be completely legible. Many have even taken on dual meanings. For example, in modern culture, the skull emoji is more than a simple skull. It does not necessarily represent death or doom in the same way that the skull and crossbones emoji does. Instead, the plain skull seems to have replaced the

commonplace phrase, "I'm dead" in meaning, "I can't handle this," or "I'm embarrassed." For this reason, emojis have many parallels with hieroglyphics and cuneiform as they are more a visual communication as opposed to a written alphabet.^{9 10}

Still in a world that is so incredibly digital, a large portion of communication is now done either through text messages, emails, or phone calls. In other words, important visual cues such as body language or facial expressions that we have relied on for generations to distinguish between sarcasm and



⁹ Skull Emoji from (Apple, *Skull*, 2010)

¹⁰ Skull and Crossbones Emoji from (Apple, *Skull and Crossbones*, 2015)

serious or aggression and playfulness are no longer as present. Emojis, however, add this element back in. So it is not that emojis, pictograms, or visuals in general are making a new language or diluting and therefore lessening a pre-existing one. It is rather that they are helping non-visual communication to “create greater layers and nuance in asynchronous communications.” In other words, emojis demonstrate a better understanding of someone’s tone or intentions in their communication, making the message more easily understood not only between individuals, but also between generations or even cultures. Just as drawing is foundational to writing, images are foundational to our reading.

Of course, emojis themselves come with limitations and must be consciously decoded in ways that facial expressions or body language may not. However, as studies have shown, age is not actually a good predictor of whether or not an individual will use emojis in their messaging. Instead, those who are tech savvy are more likely to use emojis because they are more familiar with the pictograms (Alshenqeeti 2016). This means that it is not that emojis are more difficult to read than faces, but more that we have more practice with facial expressions and thus we are more fluent in them.

However, emojis are an extremely simplified example of the phenomenon of visual literacy and visual fluency. They are, after all, based on more universal experiences and simplified down to a singular emotion or phrase. In many cases, emojis are actually used as an example for how images can be childish as they are not nuanced enough to discuss in the literary classroom. Still, they are a great example of images that are inherently more situated within social practices and the visuals that one individual grows up with can be largely different than the visuals that another grows up with even if the language the two speak is the same.

While emojis might be a contemporary example of images interacting with text, story, and human emotion, earlier sections in this essay clearly outline that this relationship is far from new. Humanity has for as long as it has existed used images to express itself and relate to one another. The written language was generated as a secondary layer in order to more accurately represent and display these ideas. However, the secondary tier does not always fully encompass the fullness of the experience. In addition, it is limiting in how specific it can be as everyone may not relate to an event in the same way. The image creates space for the specific and the universal to coexist. In this way, images provide a space for a student to relate to a text on a personal level without it restricting the overall audience to that singular individual.

Conclusion

On the surface, one might think we are more fluent with words because that is what we have had a formal education in. However, despite the general populace dealing with a lack of training in the visual arts, we still continue to see and live every day. The difference in the two processes is exactly how Vygotsky laid it out previously. With words, we are facing a secondary layer of communication. Words are made of abstract shapes and lines that hold no meaning unless we give them meaning. No amount of experience in the world could allow an individual to pull meaning from a paragraph of the English language unless they have some sort of key which allows them to relate it to something they already know, or unless they had experience with the language already. However, images are at once personal and universal. We can look at something and relate it to our childhood and thus pull understanding from a lived experience. We can also look at something and pull meaning from an innate psychological experience that is preprogrammed into the human brain. Either way, we see how our visual experiences impact the

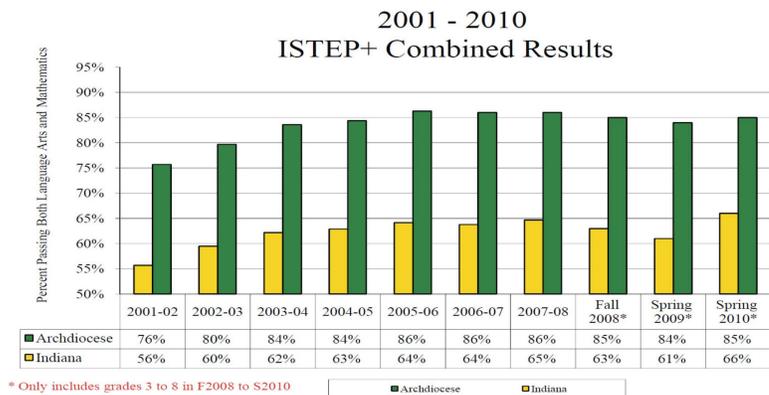
words we choose to describe what we see and in turn the words we read or hear can impact the way that we understand what we have seen. With this understanding, images become inseparable from literacy and the two become, more or less, inextricably linked.

Contemporary Educational Context

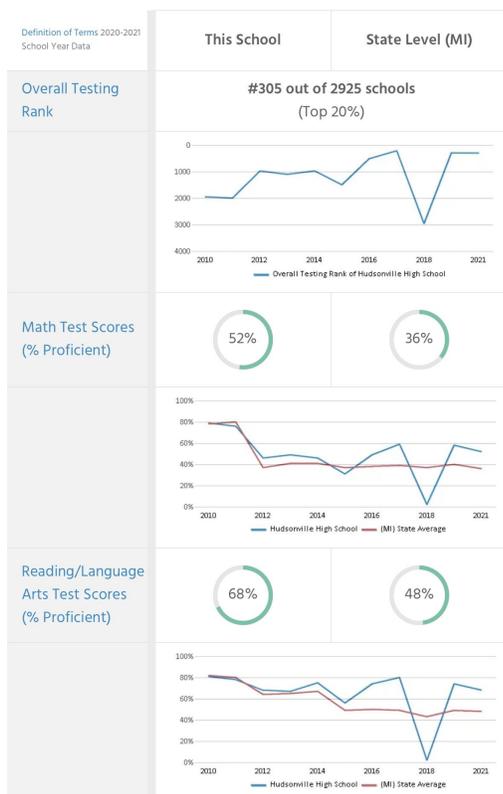
Common Contemporary Practices

In the realm of our current education system, it seems that literacy and visuals are separated into two different categories whether it is true or not. The phenomenon occurs not because reading images is “too easy,” or even “too hard.” Rather, images are left in the world of the elite or the immature in part because of the history of the printing press and how images were so expensive to print at the time that reading education became wide spread, but also in part because of a trend within the education system that values what is easily measurable. It is easy to test an individual on vocabulary, on grammatical correctness, or on the plot of a story. It is not easy to test someone on their ability to pull meaning from a subjective image. In addition, it is even harder to test someone on their ability to understand this image when so much of their understanding is fed from their personal experience in life. Thus, by removing the image from education and keeping it limited to specific areas such as theater classes or art classes, education remains easily defined and measurable. Unfortunately, these actions also remove a large portion of a student’s connection to the real world while also severing the foundational link between images and second tier communication styles such as writing which makes effort more noticeable.¹¹

One of the major reasons that the education system became hinged on this need to measure was this need to compete. Students needed to be compared to one



¹¹ Image from (Unknown, *ISTEP scores for archdiocesan students are well above average*, 2011)

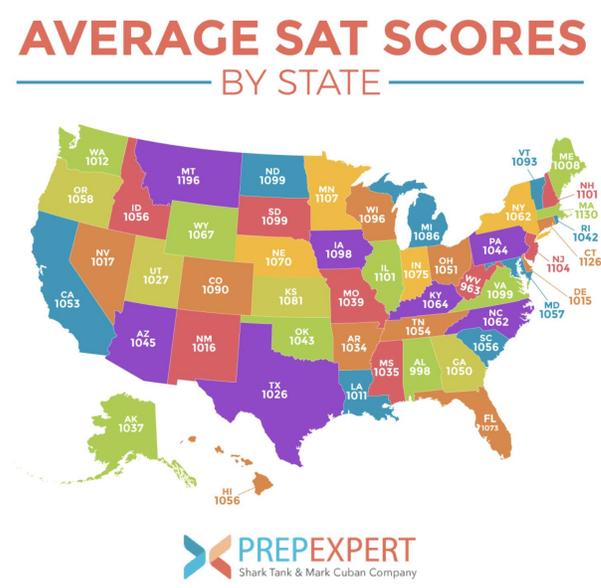


another so that way there could be a system for telling which student was doing well and which student was not. School systems needed to compete to determine which one was deserving of grants and which one was not. Countries needed to compete in order to show off their better state of well-being. In the end, it becomes a game of using the education system not to learn, but to indicate who has the greatest future potential.¹²

A great example of a set of objectives with the goal of riveting uniformity across states which succumbs to these problems was first implemented in 2010: Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The program

was put in place to help students prepare themselves for the bigger, faster, and increasingly competitive world by preparing them for college and the career afterwards (Stack 2021). Here, one can see how the program operates off a similar definition of literacy that the CDC does.

After all, literacy is important because it permits individuals to participate in society at a certain level and helps individuals achieve their future goals. However, the program is so focused on laying out stepping stones (or learning goals) for students to follow, it limits students to a singular



¹² Graphs from (Unknown, *Hudsonville High School 2023 ranking*, 2023)

path of learning in its incessant need to measure and compare everything and everyone. Some flourish on this path. Some fall off quickly, finding it difficult to care. Unfortunately, CCSS begins as early as Kindergarten and at this point. At this age, not only do students have little to no ability to function independently in society, but they also most definitely do not have fully formed opinions on what they want out of life nor do they have the skill sets to determine a practical pathway which would allow them to achieve these goals through various levels of literacy. Due to this fact, students at this age thus learn to set goals based on their literacy. If they are doing well in the CCSS before them, they often feel encouraged to continue and pursue their academics more intensely. If they struggle in the program, they often feel the opposite (McBride et al. 2019).¹³

Ultimately, this lands CCSS in a position where their goals become increasingly general as if by staying so broad they will somehow prepare an individual for all walks of life, while still refraining from teaching general skills such as critical thinking that are both difficult to teach and measure. CCSS thus has three main goals in its reading and writing objectives.

The first of these is an emphasis on building knowledge through informational text. In this goal, CCSS is attempting to combine teaching the skill of reading with the absorbing of other information— usually in the sciences or social sciences. They frequently believe that this will help students later in their education as it will teach them how to read information dense material such as textbooks or other research based novels, but the lack of fiction-literature can also lead to a decrease in the reader’s connection to the piece. This means students frequently have a hard time relating to what they are reading and, as informational texts become more specific to a particular area of study, students might find it less interesting and thus be less

¹³ Image from (unknown, *Average SAT Score by State*, 2020)

motivated to try (Frankel et al 2016). In addition, students might struggle to understand the specific material and thus do poorly on the assignment as CCSS attempts to spread itself into other areas of study in order to create a “well rounded” student. Unfortunately, rather than reflecting back on their confusion on that particular subject, it reflects back on their “inability to read” and thus can discourage students from reading further. In other words, it only reinstates the point made earlier: students who do well are encouraged to continue, students who do poorly are encouraged to stop.

The second of CCSS’s goals is an emphasis on reading and writing grounded in evidence. In other words, CCSS wants students to be answering questions that ask them to refer back to what they’ve read and search for the answer. CCSS believes that this will teach students how to pull out the important material within a text and teach them to focus on these facts. However, this game of hide and seek also has its drawbacks as it actually does not teach students to think independently and determine what they believe to be important and worth their attention for themselves. Instead, they are taught to wait, be told what is important, and then go searching for the answers from there.

The final goal of the CCSS is regular practice with complex texts and vocabulary. CCSS recognizes popular research that claims that the quicker and easier a student is able to recognize a word, the more likely they are to be able to read fluently. To help with this, CCSS focuses on building vocabulary through memorization so students obtain a larger vocabulary faster and are more likely to understand the complicated, informational based texts they begin reading from a young age (Stack 2021). However, this unfortunately does not teach a student to recognize words that they do not already know and relies on students learning definitions from context heavily. Many studies have now shown that learning definitions from context does not actually help

students build a lasting vocabulary at all because they are not looking at the word and learning the word they don't know. Instead, they are focusing on all of the words around it and filling in a blank with whatever understanding makes the most sense to them (Hooked on Phonics 2017).

With the necessity for school systems to be able to measure and record reading progress, the program Accelerated Reader was born. Completely independent from learning to read and reading comprehension, Accelerated Reader (AR) is a program first introduced to school systems in 1986 as an attempt to motivate students to read independently more. The idea was that students would be tested on reading comprehension and vocabulary to determine their current "reading level" and then they would be able to select any number of books that are within that reading level range or higher. This was supposed to give students a certain amount of freedom, encouraging them to pick books that they themselves find interesting as opposed to following a predetermined series of books picked out by the instructor while still getting them to read books that are challenging to them and thus improving their reading skill. The program also encouraged teachers to provide students with at least thirty-five minutes of independent reading time per class period in order to teach students good reading habits and give them time to practice their reading skills.

Upon completion of each book, students would take a test which would ask them various questions about plot, character development, or other literary elements in order to prove that they have both read the text and understood it. Depending on the difficulty of the text, the length of the text, and the grade they receive on the test, students then earn points. Some teachers set goals, asking students to strive to reach a certain amount of points each semester. Other teachers used points as a sort of monetary system, allowing students to accumulate points and trade them for goods at a classroom shop.

Unfortunately, this program does not actually help students progress in reading ability as much as one might hope. Most teachers do not have the time in their already overwhelming classroom curriculums to set aside a full thirty-five minutes or more for independent reading time, but students can easily find ways to cheat the tests. With AR tests only having ten to fifteen questions on average, and most being a summary of the plot, students are easily able to look up summaries beforehand and thus fake the reading. In addition, students who are doing the reading are suddenly being motivated by an artificial, external reward as opposed to the personal desire that would get them to continue reading past the bounds of AR. Instead, students who are doing well read rapidly, burning through books without taking the time to actually improve their vocabulary or ask critical questions, and students who are doing poorly don't read at all and either simply take the failing grade or find a way to cheat their way through the test (U.S. Department of Education 2016). Due to these factors, AR actually just feeds farther into the current problem: students are reading carelessly when they are told to, but stop reading entirely when they are not.

Interestingly, shortly after AR was established, another famous program that focuses on reading fluency known as *Hooked on Phonics* was created. Essentially operating as the antithesis to AR, this system is based on research stating that the better a child learns to read aloud, the better a child will be able to read silently. In other words, as a child learns to pronounce various words, they will have to spend less and less time looking at the word in order to recognize its meaning. To teach a child to recognize words, *Hooked on Phonics* breaks them into simple parts based on sounds. Their research indicates that learning to recognize and distinguish between sounds within words makes a reader more sensitive to sounds within other words. The ability to recognize word sounds and hear them inside one's head is one of the most important parts of

silent reading. If a student stumbles across a word they do not know how to say aloud, they are more likely to simply skip over it thus, while still grasping the overall meaning of the section, not adding to their vocabulary or improving their reading ability (Pikulski et al. 2005).

Still, *Hooked on Phonics* also places a large emphasis on print exposure. The more time a student sees a word, the more likely that they are to add it to their vocabulary. Assink (1984) found that a student needs to see a word four to eight times before it is fully internalized whereas other readers need to see it as much as fifteen to twenty times within a very short period of time (Hooked on Phonics 2017). However unlike other prestructured programs such as CCSS, *Hooked on Phonics* chooses stories not based on informative content, but on how engaging each of the stories are. After all, *Hooked on Phonics* places its emphasis on reading ability and comprehension alone, where as CCSS is much more comprehensive. This means that *Hooked on Phonics's* stories, especially for young readers, are frequently fictional stories full of fun and relatable characters and even pictures as the program believes that images can be used to grab the attention of young readers and help them maintain focus.

All in all, *Hooked on Phonics* focuses deeply on teaching students the skill of how to read for themselves much like CCSS and AR. However, *Hooked on Phonics* is widely unsuccessful as very few students wish to spend the time obsessing over word parts and putting in the grunt work on phonics (Mahaffe 1993). CCSS and AR still both have merits in their attempts to create clear stepping stones for how to actually measure improvement within students and recognize weak points, while also furthering their education in other ways. However, CCSS takes away all autonomy in a student's education, making it difficult for them to want to motivate themselves to continue the learning process. On the other hand, AR provides external reward which ultimately motivates students to read books quickly rather than carefully making it difficult for them to

actually improve their fluency. After all, personal motives are one of the most important pieces in life-long reading and learning.

On another note, *Hooked on Phonics* is the only of these three programs to intentionally insert images to help capture that attention of readers and use it as motivation. Even so, this addition is largely used as a pretty picture to capture the young reader's eye and the images are largely faded out as reader's get older and attention spans improve. However, as seen in more specific research on the use of visuals in literature, the image, the illustration, or the visual in general often not only helps hold the attention of a reader, but it also increases overall comprehension, memory, and emotional connections to a piece.

Recent Experiments and their Findings about Images within Literature

In their study, Brookshire et al. tried to see what sort of influence illustrations had on a child's book preferences and comprehension. The study broke down nine different selections of children books into categories of illustration style, brightness, and drawing to text ratio. The study then asked first and third grade students to rank the books from their favorite to their least favorite and followed up with a simple quiz to determine which of the books the students understood the best. The study ended up showing that children had a preference for books which were largely realistic in style and brightly colored (Brookshire et al. 2002). This clearly indicates what many have always believed: children are drawn to the extra simulation that comes from bright and eye-catching illustrations. It helps keep their attention span in one spot as they follow from moment to moment within the book. However, having a preference for realistic art form also shows that children are more likely to be interested and focused on a text which is recognizable to them. Children, just like adults, are drawn to what is familiar and relatable.

In a continuation of the study, researchers also found that children across both grade levels understood books which included both images and written text best and understood books with text alone the least (Brookshire et al. 2002). Similarly, Greenroot ran a study with preschoolers where they had parents read their respective children stories both with and without visual aids. The children were then asked a series of questions to gauge both memory retention of the story as well as comprehension of the text. As expected, the study indicated that the young children struggled to remember and comprehend the story when it was only read to them. Instead, they both understood more of the story and recalled the plot better with the addition of illustrations as they prompted a more interactive reading. This once more proves that illustrations help improve reading comprehension and memory retention (Greenroot et al. 2014).

Unfortunately, these traits are still seen as something that we grow out of as opposed to something that we grow upon. Children are expected to eventually forgo the crutch that is visual aids and hold their attention completely for themselves. They are expected to look at longer and longer pieces of text, broken only by paragraphs and unfiltered by images. In many cases, parents report that around ages eight to ten, children begin to announce that they have completed a book entirely by themselves and entirely without pictures more proudly as if completing a book with visuals is somehow less of an accomplishment (Paul 2021). However, this value system of what is seen as academic is learned, not inherent.¹⁴

This is apparent when the same trends that held true for younger children show to still hold true in studies done on high school students who supposedly have much more matured



¹⁴ Image from (Stoker, B., *Dracula The Graphic Novel*, 2019)

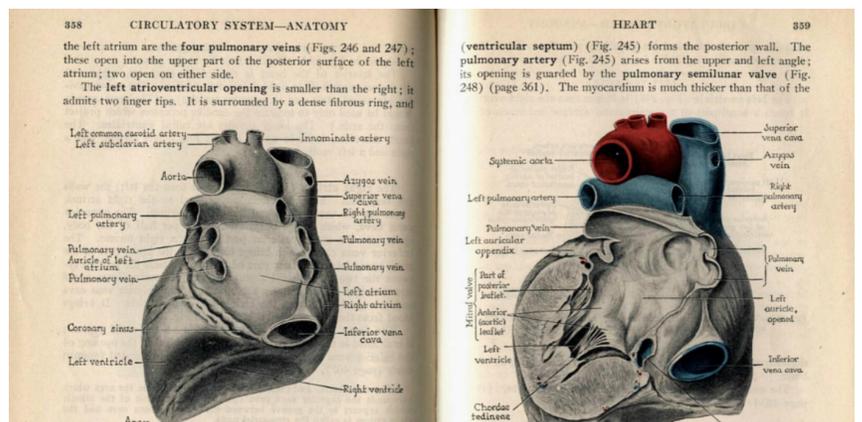
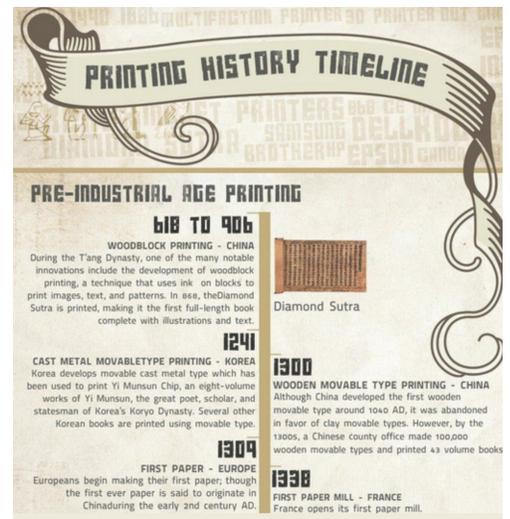
senses of literacy and larger attention spans. In one case, students were recruited into two different classrooms. In one classroom, students were given a graphic supplement in addition to their regular text provided by the teacher which they were free to use as they wished. The other class resumed as normal without any graphic supplements. On top of regular tests throughout the semester which gauge understanding of the text, both classrooms were given a survey which measured their reading motivation level both at the start and at the end of the semester. As expected, students who had the graphic novel supplement performed significantly higher on comprehension as measured by their test scores than students who did not receive the graphic material. Interestingly, in their responses on the motivational survey, students did not report feeling more motivated to read after the graphic supplement. Instead, their reading motivations stayed very stagnant (Wood 2015).

However, this is not to undo all I have built by saying that images have no impact on reading motivation; rather, this simply adds another layer to it. These students tested better when having the graphic novel supplement, so clearly the images had at the very least an impact on their understanding. But after their experimental semester, there was no promise of ever engaging in another text with this sort of layout again. In addition, within their comments on the motivation survey, many students noted that they actually had a hard time reading the graphic novel and felt that they didn't understand it very well despite their high test scores. This is not a fluke. In fact, in other studies where students had to engage in multimodal learning or group work which asked them to work with material with multiple senses as opposed to simply listening to lecture, students consistently scored higher on tests despite claiming to feel like they have learned less (Wood 2015). This trend is due to the fact that students are simply not used to engaging with material like this. As mentioned earlier, people have the tendency to be drawn to

what is familiar. Plus, when engaging with a simple text or when learning material through lecture alone, many students simply memorize the information necessary for short periods of time. However when tested in the long term, students who engage in multimodal learning techniques consistently continue to outperform those who learn through lecture alone (Reuell 2019). As students do better and become more skilled readers and thinkers, the amount of effort that they need to put into a text is decreased, thus making it more likely they will have the necessary amount of motivation to get through the piece (as well as retain the information). It is also worth asking if the distaste these kids have for graphic novels is a learned trait. After all, just as we have learned that images are for children, they have too and now they feel belittled by the very optionality of them.

Nonetheless, as we discussed earlier, decreased effort is not the only aspect of reading motivation which requires movement. Rather, the personal connection to a piece of literature must also be forged and not all visuals within a text are going to be able to be realistic drawings which remind us of the lives that we live. Different types of information require different modes of visual aid. For example, a narrative might have more picturesque drawings in which the setting is sketched out or perhaps a moment of two characters interacting is detailed, but scientific texts are well known for their more technical graphics.

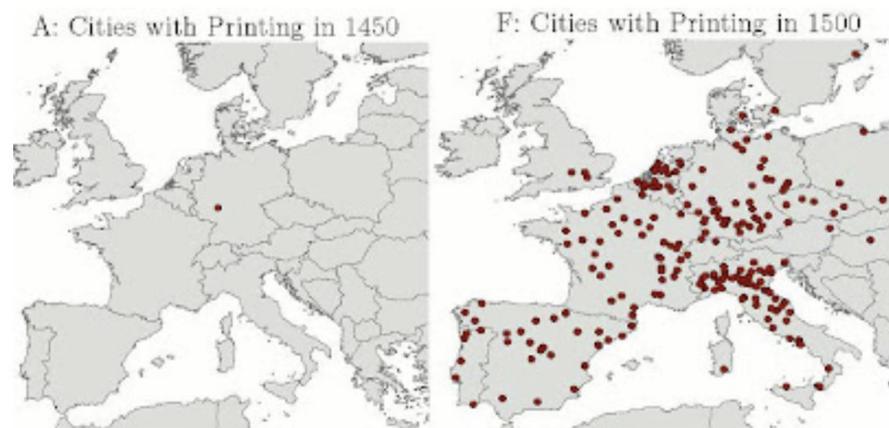
Anatomy textbooks are filled to the brim with diagrams and charts illustrating simplified versions of



human organs, cutting them in slices in order to label its parts in a less confusing way than what words could provide. In addition, botany books include images of leaves, stems, or even entire plants in partnership with detailed paragraphs explaining the uniqueness or the usefulness of the plant to teach the reader to recognize it upon first glance. History books include maps or timelines which help the reader keep track of what is happening, where it is happening, and when it is happening, in reference to the other moving pieces. The inclusion of these graphics does not make the information that it is paired with any less academic or any less important. Instead, they simply provide another

means connecting to a piece.¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷

How does this relate back to reading motivations though? Well, reading a graphic novel or any image is



not a mindless task. It requires quite a lot of skill. As outlined in my previous section, images are actually read in a manner similar to words and it takes time to develop literacy. However, the more one sees an image, the better one is at reading it. The same is true for graphic novels. And as reading motivations are deeply tied into how much work it takes one to read something compared to what they think they will get out of it, results with graphic novels will vary with the level of familiarity.

¹⁵ Timeline from (Unknown, *Printing History Timeline*, 2016)

¹⁶ Diagram from (Ahmed et al., *Medical code switch: learning the language of Physicians Scope*, 2020)

¹⁷ Map from (Perry, J. *Economic Impact of the Printing Press*, 2011)

In other words, it is not that slapping a related image on a mass of text is suddenly going to increase motivation to read that text and by extension, all other texts in the future. Instead, it is more likely that within the classroom setting, if teachers engage with formats which are more similar to what students are engaging with outside the classroom, more students will feel comfortable and willing to attempt to participate in the new style of learning. In addition to this, students will feel that the work is relevant to their life outside of the classroom and thus be willing to put the work in as it is not just extraneous busy work, but work which will help them in their day to day lives (Gambrell 2011). Afterall, it is better to help students learn how to read and engage with their world critically as opposed to how to read “the right away” and images, like those found in the graphic novel genre, are able to help with this.

It is also worth noting that studies have shown that there are three main meanings that a student can pull from an image:

- **Representational meaning**— consists of patterns such as those found in a sequence of time or action (narrative patterns) or those found in hierarchies (conceptual patterns)
- **Compositional meaning**— consists of the placement, size, and distance between items in an image
- **Interactional meaning**— consists of the social engagements that occur due to the different ways that viewers will see an image (Staurseth 2019).

Different images utilize these meanings to different degrees. An artistic depiction of an anatomically correct heart that has been labeled by part might have less representational meaning than that found in an abstract painting with figures that look both human and animalistic. For this reason, it is important to know what and how educators want their students to engage with a

piece. It is also interesting to note that each of these meanings impacts a reader's motivation in different ways.



An image or graphic which carries representational meaning heavily might help a student track a story from point A to point B more easily as it may fill in any gaps that a lower level in reading comprehension might leave behind. Thus with decreased effort, reading becomes more likely. Likewise, artwork which depicts a critical moment in the story's plot or perhaps an ominous moment of the story's setting might give enough context to raise

the reader's interest and make them want to know more, but not enough that they can answer their questions without reading. Ultimately, this boosts the personal connection as it places some amount of emotional stakes into the story before the individual even begins the process of reading .¹⁸

An image which portrays greater compositional meaning might help a reader see a power dynamic between characters that was missed in the text leading to an increased understanding with minimal effort. Or perhaps an emotional aspect of the story might become more apparent which makes a reader relate to the main



¹⁸ Both images from (Martin, A., *Narrative Art*)

character on a deeper level which increases the personal connection and ultimately leads to a boost in reading motivations.

An image which utilizes greater interactional meaning will potentially have the greatest impact on reading motivation entirely. Not only will conversation between peers force students to think about a story in new ways and see connections between them, their peers, and the story, but the conversation might also lead to a deeper understanding of the actual content of the story making it more easily understood. After all, the interactional meaning is an image which forces the most pause out of a reader providing additional time for reflection and consideration while still oftentimes leaving room for curiosity (Staurseth 2019).

Ultimately, not only do these studies show that children have a preference for images or other visuals in their texts, but they also highlight that students actually read and comprehend better with the addition of these images. In addition, students do not grow out of these trends like many individuals might expect. Instead, students continue to remember content longer and understand the ideas within the text better when given the opportunity to engage with the material through multimodal devices such as images, illustrations, or graphic content. This form of media also allows for students to have more opportunity for emotional or personal connections to the text which can increase the overall motivation to engage with the text. So not only can the addition of increased comprehension and decrease the amount of effort a student needs to exert in order to understand the text, but they can also increase the amount of motivation a student has to read it making the entire learning experience more personally rewarding and less exhausting.

Discussion

Previous discussion has outlined that students are not reading due to the shift in emphasis within school systems. This shift pushes for educators to make studies that occur within the classroom more easily measured so that students might be compared and made to compete with each other. Part of this shift in emphasis has removed the visual arts from the literary arts. In the mind of the education systems, visuals became unnecessary, childish, and too subjective while the literary is made to be factual, cold cut, and with a single answer. Despite this, the visual arts have been inherent to literature for a long time as they create a space for the reader to engage with the text on a personal and emotional level. This emotional connection is a large part of what has inspired people to read for a long time, as so much of the reason we read is to learn to understand ourselves, others, and the world which we all live in. This is not to say that words are incapable of creating emotional connection without the assistance of images; however, images can work in unison with the written text in order to deepen the experience and help speed the process too.

After all, previously images have been shown to be foundational to communication. Despite what systems focused on standardized learning and measurements such as CCSS, AR, and *Hooked on Phonics* might present, literacy's definition does not exclude all that is not written words on a page. Instead, literacy can be expanded upon through the use of visuals that allow for a greater ability to extract, construct, and integrate meaning. In fact, the studies laid out earlier show that images can actually increase the very comprehension and memory scores that these programs strive to increase all while stimulating deeper conversation and helping students find the importance of reading and learning through emotional connection.

Why does this matter, though? At the end of the day, if we are seeing the world step away from reading and dive purely into the visual arts, why should we stop the process from continuing? After all, everything that has been said before has emphasized the importance of images, how we read them, and the impact they have on us emotionally. Is it not fair to say that visual arts have outgrown the literary arts with the blooming industries like film and television, social media, and more?

One study done by Julia Mikkonen suggested “that the concept of understanding outperforms the concept of knowledge in descriptions the various cognitive values associated with literature: the insights, viewpoints, and attitudes— the ‘enlarged comprehension’ — that people are believed to gain from literature.” In other words, Mikkonen was trying to get educators and students alike to see that the point of reading is not to become very good at understanding that one particular text, but to take the larger meaning behind that text, how it applies to the individual reader, the current time period, and compare that to the larger world. In short, the importance of literature is learning the skills of thinking and relating (Mikkonen 2015).

Very similarly, the John Hopkins Review begins to confront the importance of the written word in their article “Literature Matters Today” where researcher Hillis Miller discusses the “prestidigitalization” of the written word. Prestidigitalization is a phenomenon that has been unfolding before us for years where written texts and forms of literature are transitioned into a virtual or e-text format. Miller believes that this phenomenon is cheapening our viewing and our understanding of the written word as, “the mode of materialization of a given literary work fundamentally determines its meaning and its performative force” (Miller 2013). In other words, Miller finds value in literature not for its clinical ability to inform, but for its innate ability to connect with the individual. She treats it as an art form which “serves three essential human

functions: social critique, the pleasure of the text, and allowing a materialization of the imaginary or an endless approach to the unapproachable imaginary.” In this, Miller claims that the written and physical appearance of literature in our lives matters deeply because it fulfills an inner desire to connect while also fulfilling an external need to understand, critique, and expand the world we currently live in.

So no, it is not fair to say that visuals have outgrown the literary world or vice versa. Just as in both of these articles, literature is either categorized as or compared to physical artwork, literature and visuals will always work hand in hand with one another. They are both seen as something which is inherently interconnected to the human experience and in order to be understood, must be tied to internal experiences, understandings, or questions. Remove this portion from the experience of reading literature, and much of the internal motivation to continue reading disappears. Remove the literature from the artwork, and it becomes largely subjective and unanchored.

In addition, it is important to remember that we live in a world where we find ourselves overrun with visual stimuli which fulfill this artistic desire within us. Thus, time that could have previously been spent reading is much more likely to be devoted to other media due to its easily consumable format. By putting the art back in literature, and increasing images, illustrations, graphics, or whatever other visuals might aid in the communication of the specific message, this phenomenon could potentially be minimized if it is not the beginning of the reversal process.

Afterall, artwork— both verbal and visual— requires two things of its viewers/readers: effort and connection. As our readers struggle to find the motivation and the willingness to put in the effort to read something they feel is not relevant to their overwhelmingly visual world, adding images may help bridge the growing gap between motivation required and motivation

possessed. The addition of images does this by increasing the individual's personal connection to a piece which increases reading motivation. Part of the personal connection comes from a deeper emotional engagement with the text whether it be from a familiar art style, an impactful color scheme, or something else. Part of the personal connection may also come from the very fact that it is more similar to the visual media they engage with on a day to day basis. The addition of images may also help lower the overall amount of motivation necessary to read a piece by offering an aid in understanding, comprehension, and memory of a text which would lead to an overall decrease in effort.

In line with offering aid in understanding, it is important to note that one of the reasons multimodal learning is so important is because it offers increased opportunities of accessibility to various students. Just as not all students understand an image— or even a verbal text— in the same way, not all students engage with learning in the same ways. Some students struggle with reading English because it is not their first language. Other students struggle with reading English because they have some variation of a learning disability or handicap. By offering additional pathways for students to engage in the classroom, it is not only going to help the neurotypical student find motivation to continue learning, but it will also offer an opportunity for the neurodivergent student to find methods of engagement that work for them, ultimately adding to the overall knowledge and experiences that can be shared within and outside of the classroom.

This problem is not limited to the elementary classroom, nor is it capped after high school graduation. Instead, educators should view this as a chance to encourage students in lifelong learning. After all, it is important to continue to engage with other ideas, individuals, and cultures alike to continue to grow as an individual. The classroom is not designed to teach each person how to handle every single problem or situation in life, but rather to teach students how to

engage with problems and find solutions in general through critical analysis and applying personal experience as well as learned experience to the present situation. In other words, the job of the classroom is not to teach students how to read, but how to be literate, and literacy includes images.

In the Future

This study is not suggesting it has all the answers, or even that all the answers it does have are universally correct. Rather, this study functions to bring light to the raging reading motivation issue that is ravaging our education system. It fights to bring attention to our struggling students and dissect some of the systemic reasons behind their struggles and ultimately offer a suggestion on how to solve some of them.

One of the major limiting factors in this study was current available research. I would love to see this study expanded to include specific case studies of classrooms which regularly use images in literature as well as other visual based material in other areas of study and see how long term motivation is affected. I would also love to see this study expanded to see the difference in motivation between image-integrated-texts used only at an intervention level vs image-integrated texts used throughout the whole of an individual's education. In the future, I would also like to see this study dive further into the aid that practices like including visuals in mainstream texts could provide to neurodivergent or people with disability.

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