**The Role of Visual Thinking in Writing the News Story**

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> [H]e seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being?
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> -James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

In the above quotation, Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist in Joyce's novel, describes an epiphany of his artistic calling as a writer (130). Loosely based on Joyce's own journey of self-discovery, the protagonist's name alludes to Daedalus, the Greek mythological figure who fashions wings in order to escape imprisonment from the island of Crete. What becomes foregrounded is the issue of artistic transcendence – in creating art, the artist must rise above the dictates of his or her world and transform matter (or reality) through creative vision. What grounds of comparison does this opening analogy have for teaching writing in the English classroom? Interestingly, *Portrait* is written in the style of the semi-autobiographical novel employing heavy use of stream-of-consciousness. Essentially, stream-of-conscious is a mode in which writing is meant to reflect both mental images fused with spontaneous thoughts. Consequently, it is typically highly visual in nature. The implication therefore is that in writing memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, this stream-of-conscious method of visualization may offer a powerful pedagogical tool that provides an entry point for more complex writing tasks. What if, for example, teachers, instead of getting students to write topic sentences or structure their ideas into five paragraph essays, required students to freely respond to questions that tapped on their perceptual, sensory, and intuitive knowledge? What if, prior to writing the first draft of

an essay, spontaneity and visual thinking were privileged over deliberate planning and critical thinking? What if student responses were stimulated by visual experiences deliberately created by the teacher through classroom activities and interactions?

These were some of the questions I considered when I implemented a 'Writing through visual thinking' curriculum in a New York City high school in the spring of 2009. The outcome of this ten-week curriculum was the production of a newsletter targeted at pre-college students in the school with the aim of informing them about various fields of study they can consider when applying for college. Students thus worked in small news teams with each team assigned to cover a story by conducting in-depth interviews with current graduates from various specialized fields. In the process, students had to acquire an understanding of the aesthetic composition of multimodal texts (in this case, the newspaper) in order to produce the story. Although the newspaper is considered 'old' medium in contrast to new digital media such as hypertext stories, the instructional emphasis was not on the medium but the aesthetics of multimodality. In this sense, news stories, involving an integration of image and words, verbal narrative and visual design, offer economical and efficient ways to achieve the objectives of the curriculum. In utilizing a multimodal pedagogy to teach news writing, students were encouraged to transfer their analysis of the visual text to the printed text. The curriculum was modeled on three key principles which I will elaborate in the following sections together with its theoretical rationale.

**Look and Speak Before You 'Think'!**

Principle 1: Sense and Perception as Starting Points

It is 2 P.M. in the afternoon, the last period of the day. As the students enter the room to take their seats, one can hear a variety of languages spoken – Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic. This is one of many schools in New York City that caters specially to recent immigrants to the United States. As a result, most students have only acquired English within the last three or four years. This class of twenty-five students is also highly diverse comprising broadly of countries from Africa (4%), the Middle East (12%), South and East Asia (40%) and South America (44%). At the beginning of the class, the students expect me to ask a lead-in question or introduce the objectives of the lesson. However, I startle them by showing an image on the screen (see Figure 1) and informing them that before I say anything more, they are to write down their initial reactions to the image. "Don't analyze the painting," I tell them. "Just tell me what you see, what you feel, what strikes you about it, what stands out."

This initial question is meant to privilege sensory perception before reasoning. Not only does this take the pressure off from students trying to guess at a possible 'right' answer the teacher may have, it also surfaces and validates the intuitive knowledge they have as they examine the text.  Arnheim argues that from the time of the Greek philosophers to the present, reason has been privileged over the senses (4). In the context of education, students are taught to filter their responses through analytical reasoning first (as observed in the common adage 'Think before you speak!'). By asking students to provide immediate, initial sensory responses before

critical and analytical thinking, teachers are able to open the text to a plurality of possible interpretations later on.

After I ask the question, there is silence in the class as all eyes are glued to the front. The image compels them, impels them, draws them in. There is a story in the painting and the story comes alive in their imaginations. After a few minutes, the students begin to respond to the image. (Note: All names of students in this article are pseudonyms).

**Figure 1**. Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin*



"The red stands out for me," says Ronda. "It's like when I look and close my eyes, all I see is the red."

"How do you feel when you see the red?" I ask.

"I don't know… It's rich, not like blood. Like real bright," she says.

"It makes it stand out somehow," says her partner next to her.

Sharifa interrupts and says, "Maybe the artist wants us to pay attention to the woman."

Another hand goes up in the far right of the room. "Somehow I feel like I'm not looking at the woman," says Tyree.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I don't know, like I'm looking past the two people."

"Anyone else feels the same?"

At least ten other hands go up. Adeline adds, "The background seems like it has more action going on. Like there's a boat there on a river…". At this time, there is a buzz among the students and at least five students are speaking at the same time, pointing out various details in the background of the painting such as the boat, the winding river, the buildings by the side of the river, the forest at the edge of the paintings and two objects which appear to look like little people staring at the river.

When the class settles, some students point to the contrast between the two people who are calmly seated facing each other as if participating in a ceremonial blessing and the life and activity of the city in the background. At the end of this lead-in activity, I inform the students that one of the main objectives of the lesson is to learn how artists and writers create depth in texts which involves acquiring knowledge about the terminology as well as the techniques used. For example, I highlight that one student's point about the contrast between the front and back of the painting can be termed the contrast between foreground and background and the technique used is known as layering. By showing a series of images, students induce that depth can be

created by adding layers of meaning to texts. Next, students are introduced to three other techniques employed by artists to create depth in images:

1. Perspective – The inclusion of more than one perspective can add depth to an image. Students are introduced to concepts involving one-point, two-point, and three-point converging line perspectives.

2. Tone – There is a greater sense of depth when there is a greater degree of contrast in tone. Students are introduced to the concepts of tonal contrast and tonal diffusion.

3. Detail – The extent to which detail is added either to the foreground or background of the image adds to a greater illusion of depth.

In a later session, the students apply this knowledge of creating different degrees of depth in images when they take photographs of invited guests using digital cameras. These photographs would later be used to accompany their news story.

**A Picture's Links to a Thousand Words!**

Principle 2: Meta-conceptual Links Between Visual and Verbal Texts

The second principle that informs the design of the curriculum is the notion that visual and verbal texts share meta-conceptual links. This seems to contradict recent research in multimodal literacy that emphasizes the need for students to acquire distinct grammars of particular modes. Kress and van Leeuwen note that while there is a considerable degree of congruence in the semiotic processes of language and visual communication, each medium has its own possibilities and limitations of meaning. For example, writing offers syntactic, grammatical and lexical resources; speech offers pitch, pitch variation, tonal quality and intensity (loudness); and image offers resources such as color, space, spatial relations and movement (19). The implication therefore is that students need to consider the different roles or functions of each mode included in multimodal texts e.g. image, words, sound etc. While there is no doubt that students should acquire knowledge of the distinctions offered by each particular mode, I propose that as an introduction to the multimodal nature of texts, teachers can begin by examining the shared connections between different modes through their meta-conceptual links.

Having analyzed the techniques used to create depth in images, the students proceed to examine depth in the photographs of a news story about a recent plane crash in the Hudson River. Without providing models or giving too many explanations, I ask them to transfer their understanding of layering in images to analyzing this concept in the news story. Most students are able to identify multiple layers in both image and printed text though regarding the printed text, there is less agreement about what these are. For example, Saifaah notes that the two layers in the story concern the emergency landing of the plane and the reactions of the office workers in Manhattan while Evelyn perceptively points to two layers concerning the present which makes a reference to the safe landing of the plane and the past concerning a reference to a fatal air crash in the Potomac River 27 years ago. In the following sessions, the concepts of angle and

dominance are introduced since these are also common in all forms of stories whether visual or linguistic. For example, a story comes into existence when, out of all the possible occurrences within a specific space and time, the author decisively attends to some events rather than others and frames the story around them. Consequently, the story is told through the perspective or lens of the author whose point of view is articulated through a specific angle. In addition, the story leads to a focal point. In conventional narrative stories, this dominant point could be the central problem of the story which is resolved at the end. In other stories, this point of dominance may be conveyed through the theme or issue explored in the story, the authorial voice (e.g. satire), and the style of storytelling (e.g. parody). Visual frames are used to help students transfer their reading of news photographs to reading the news story as illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 1.

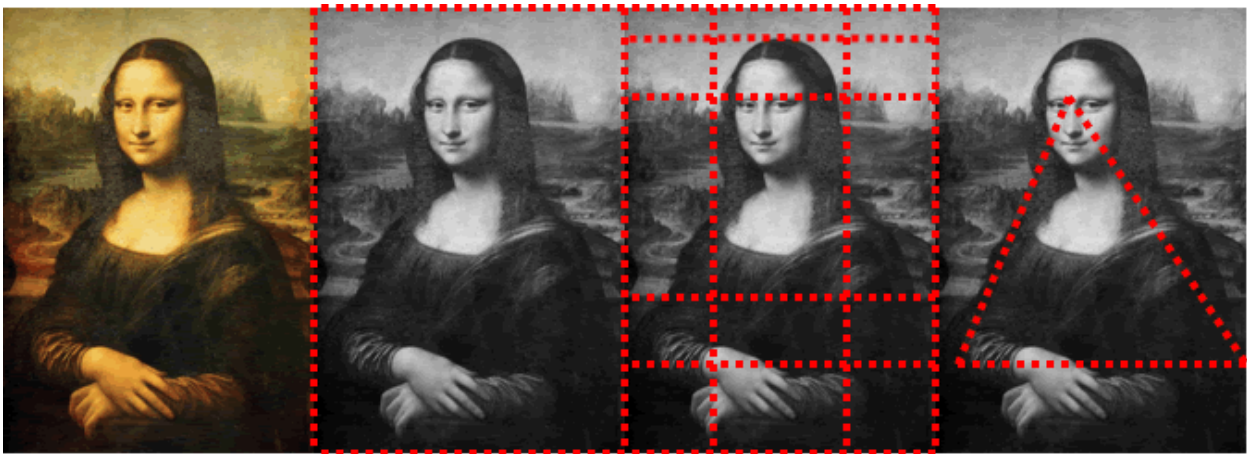**Figure 2.** Visual Frames in Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*



**Table 1.** Visual Frames Linking Meta-concepts in Images and Printed Texts

| Meta-concepts | Visual frames | Example in *Mona Lisa* | Application to printed text |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The concept of angle** – Every story has a particular authorial angle determined by the elements within its frame. | **The rectangular frame** – In an image, the angle is determined by image components within the rectangular frame. Note that sometimes the frames of images may take the form of other shapes e.g. circular. | In the second image in Figure 2, the rectangular frame combines all elements within the visual space causing the viewer to consider the relationship among all elements within it. | The angle of the news story is similarly determined by elements within the frame of the story. Like the *Mona Lisa* painting, the frame typically contains the setting and the key characters involved. |

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|---|---|---|---|
| **The concept of depth** – Stories contain different degrees of depth. Authors may employ the use of layering, perspective, tone and detail to add depth to stories. | **The horizontal and vertical lines within the frame** – The lines within the image frame differentiates an inner frame (the foreground) from an outer frame (background). Complex images may contain more than two layers. | In the third image in Figure 2, the horizontal lines follow the folding arms, the horizon, the eyebrows and the top of the subject's head while the vertical lines follow the flow of the subject's hair. | The degree of depth in the news story can be discussed in relation to the number of layers within the story as well as the elements in the background or foreground of the story. In news stories, elements that are foregrounded may be immediately identified in the headline. |
| **The concept of dominance** – Authors typically direct attention towards specific elements in the story, known as the point of dominance. | **The triangular frame** – Our eyes are directed toward a particular point in an image. This creates an imaginary triangle of dominance. | In the fourth image in Figure 2, our eyes are directed from the base of the painting to the space between the subject's eyes. | In news articles, the most important points are typically found in the lead paragraph with the rest of the story organized in a declining order of importance. |

**Painting a Portrait in Words!**

Principle 3: The Art of Visualization in Writing the News Story

Although it is not new to claim that images can function as a powerful stimulus for writing, what has been less discussed in research is a multimodal pedagogy that links the potentialities of image to words. In this case, the emphasis is on the meta-conceptual aesthetic links between image and words and it is here that the connection between the visual text and writing the news story can offer educators a useful methodological tool that can lead students to crafting richer and more complex stories. This differs from conventional approaches to writing tasks assigned in the classroom that tends to be predominantly mono-modal. Kaufer and Butler note that the teaching of composition in schools has become focused on visible language structures (grammar and genre) so that it is common for teachers to lapse into formulaic writing instruction instead of focusing on aesthetic composition as seen in other fields of compositional arts such as literature, music, drama, and film (1). Hence, the third principle in the curriculum is the application of students' understanding of the meta-conceptual links between images and words to writing. For example, teachers can assign students to explore many of Rembrandt's self portraits (which can be found online) and have them analyze the aesthetic composition of the images as a stimulus to writing a profile of the subject concerned (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Sample Writing Task Based on Image Analysis

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**A Day in the Life of Rembrandt**

**Task**: Your task is to write a profile story of the imagined life of the Dutch painter, Rembrandt.

**Part one – Analyze the art**

Your story will be based on your analysis of Rembrandt's self portraits. Select three images and examine them in detail. For each image, make notes concerning:

1. Angle – What is the angle/focus in the image? What are the components within the image frame? How are the components related to each other?

2. Depth – How many layers does the image have? What is the purpose of these different layers (if any)?

3. Dominance – What is dominant in the image? How does the author direct you to this particular part of the image?

**Part Two – Write the story**

Focus on one image and transfer your analysis of the image to writing a profile of the subject. Include the three concepts of angle, depth and dominance. Use the following guided questions to help you.

1. Angle **–** Based on your analysis of the image, what is the general impression you want readers to have of your subject? What aspects of the subject's life or experiences will you highlight?

2. Depth **–** How will you add complexity to your story? Based on the number of layers in the image, how many layers do you want to include in your story? Focus on one aspect of the subject in the dominant layer and discuss this in detail. Then describe the background of the scene and its relation to the foreground.

3. Dominance – How would you describe the central focus of the image? What is the dominant mood or emotion in the image and how will you convey this in your story using language and literary techniques?

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In the final component of the curriculum, I tell the students that they are to apply their knowledge of the aesthetic composition of images into writing their own news story. This involves four key stages – the planning stage, the interview stage, the analysis stage, and the writing/editing stage. In the planning stage, students work in small groups with each student

assigned a specific role ranging from an editor, reporter, writer, photographer to a layout artist. The groups then prepare to profile an invited guest to the classroom, paying particular attention to the field of study he or she represents. The objective is to write a news story that would inform other students of possible routes to consider after graduating from high school. Such a project is particularly strategic in orienting students new to the United States about various post-high school options. Groups are also given time to brainstorm possible angles to their story and questions to ask during the interview. In the interview stage, each group is assigned to interview one of the five invited graduate students pursuing Anthropology, Communications, Graphic Design, Education and Medicine in colleges in New York City.

While the interview is conducted, the assigned photographer of each group takes a series of photographs of the interviewee. These photographs are then printed and distributed to the groups during the analysis stage. Here, groups apply concepts of angle, depth, and dominance in their analysis of the images. They then select the best one or two photographs that would complement the angle of their story. In one group for example, out of a total of twelve photographs taken of one interviewee, a Gynecologist pursuing post-doctoral research in Columbia University, the group chooses a close-up shot of the interviewee leaning casually against a chair and looking away from the camera lens. I ask them why this photograph is chosen and they explain that the sideways glance exemplifies the hidden challenges and many detours sometimes needed to get into medical school in the United States. They then proceed to draft the following paragraph after their analysis of the selected image:

> [….] It was not easy for him to decide to go to medical school. "When I was in my junior year of high school, my girlfriend left me because my grades were not very good. She got accepted into Oxford, which made her very arrogant. This forced me to work hard and motivated me to want to go to Oxford University." However, when he spoke to the counselors, they did not seem to show any understanding. "Their act of ignorance towards my ethnicity rose the fury inside and motivated me to work harder and harder. Finally, I got accepted into the Medicine department at Oxford University," he says.

As may be observed in the above example, during the writing/editing stage, groups use selected photographs as a stimulus for thinking more specifically about how to incorporate techniques used in visual composition, such as angle and layering, in writing the accompanying story. Finally, after weeks of editing involving teacher-group conferencing and peer-group editing, all the stories are put together in a newsletter that is later distributed to the entire student population.

**The Dual Roles of Critical and Visual Thinking in Writing**

In this article, I began with a proposition asking what if visual thinking were privileged in the English classroom and then proceeded to elaborate on a curriculum grounded on three principles: Sense and perception as starting points; meta-conceptual links between visual and verbal texts; the art of visualization in writing the news story. The emphasis on sensory experience, perceptual thinking and visualization is a deliberate attempt to challenge reason,

critical thinking and linearity of thought that have come to dominate the teaching of writing in contemporary English classrooms. Typically in such classrooms, critical thinking skills in various forms are emphasized such as the ability to write a persuasive argument using logical reasoning or the ability to write an informed response by analyzing and evaluating a given text. The problem, however, is that by privileging critical thinking in the writing process, other forms of thought, particularly visual thinking, may be undermined. This curriculum was therefore designed to take into account the need to include both critical and visual forms of thought through a multimodal approach to teaching writing.

The significance of a curriculum such as this is two-fold. Firstly, visual texts provide an easier access to printed texts, particularly for English Language learners, via the facilitation of meta-conceptual links. Towards the end of the curriculum, I conducted an in-depth interview with four students from the class to understand their strategies for learning to read and write in the English Language. All four students shared openly about their struggles in learning the English Language. Shawna, 19, from Bangladesh, spoke about the challenges she faces understanding difficult vocabulary in her literature texts. In order to practice her English, she watches news from the internet everyday. This is better than reading it in the newspaper, she said, because words are accompanied by images. Similarly, Hameed, 20, from Yemen, shared how he learns English primarily from watching movies rather than reading. What was clear from my interview is that the students find that images facilitate deeper interpretations of texts as well as provide a springboard for writing. When I asked about how the curriculum has helped her, Wen, 19, from China, added that the images provided an anchor for the interpretation of the text making it easier for her to understand what it is saying. Ronda, 17, from Egypt, said that now when she writes, she tries to see images in her mind and then analyzes it to help her craft a story.

Secondly, for native speakers of English, the inclusion of strategies that promote visual thinking along with critical thinking is especially relevant given the image-saturated, mass-mediated societies that they are likely to be immersed in. Various scholars have pointed to the generation gap that currently exists between the thinking processes of young people due to their greater exposure to visual stimuli and the language-centered discourse in schools which depend on linearity of thought (Buckingham 19; Kress 22).  The implication is that writing instructors will need to consider expanding the scope of the curriculum beyond the teaching of grammar and genre to include meta-concepts related to aesthetic composition in visual and printed texts. This would give students the opportunity to consider how to utilize techniques of visual design in the creation and organization of their writing. The primary goal of such an approach is to provide creative spaces in the writing classroom that would empower students to become not just writers but composers of texts.

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