

On the Importance of Visuals in Teaching and Learning

Interview with Dr. Lynell Burmark, Ph.D.

Q: With the publication of your book, *Visual Literacy: Learn to See, See to Learn*, from ASCD, you have become a nationally and internationally recognized expert on the use of visuals in teaching and learning. When did you first become interested in this topic?

A: I have always known my communications would be more powerful if they were supported by good visual aids. I remember singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" at my sixth grade graduation ceremony. I persuaded the principal to loan me his six-foot long coat rack which I covered with over a hundred crepe paper flowers. Then, I used the decorated coat rack to support a huge cardboard rainbow as the backdrop for my performance. When the curtains opened on that scene, the whole student body just gasped. It was pretty impressive.

Q: How did you use visuals as a classroom teacher?

A: I taught French to high school and college students and English as a Second Language, grades K-14. In both cases, my students did not speak the target language, so I used songs, pantomimes, pictures, and film to convey meaning. In many classrooms today, especially in states like California, Texas, and Florida, more and more students speak English as a Second Language. I volunteer at a school here in the Silicon Valley where 22 different languages are spoken. One kindergarten classroom has students speaking 19 different languages! In this kind of a situation, visuals become a kind of international, universal language that brings meaning to an otherwise incomprehensible cacophony of verbal expression.

Q: What about classrooms where all the students speak English?

A: The visuals are still our most powerful tool! Teachers always complain that we have too much to "cover" in too little time. Well, according to research from 3M Corporation, we process visuals 60,000 times faster than text! (This is because the visual channel in the brain manipulates image elements simultaneously, while the linguistic channel functions in a linear, sequential manner.)

Q: What about color? I've noticed that you have an entire chapter in the *Visual Literacy* book about color.

A: Yes, in the book I share that 80% of a person's impression of a product is based on its color. And that using color enhances learning and improves retention by more than 75%. I talk about how different colors evoke specific responses and how we can use colors intentionally and appropriately. I give specific examples in the book and in the workshops. If students could continue to use crayons K-12 instead of "advancing" to No. 2 pencils, I think there'd be a lot more learning and a lot fewer dropouts. I also think we

should give the students crayons instead of pencils for the standardized tests. But that's another issue.

Q: As you speak to educators at conferences and events around the world, what role do visuals play in that communication?

A: Probably the nicest compliment that I receive from audiences is that I practice what I preach. When I do a sixty to ninety-minute session like Strategies for More Visual Presentations, I use over a hundred full-screen, full-color photographic images in my slide show.

Q: So, do you print out all those images on your handouts?

A: That would be prohibitively expensive! Actually, as I explain at the opening of each session, the handout complements rather than replicates the images on the screen. Each medium is used for what it does best (and most economically):

- On the screen, color costs no more than black and white and pictures cost no more than text. So, the screen displays the glorious full-color photographic images. Besides the title on the opening slide and my name and e-mail address on the closing slide, I have very few words in the presentation.
- On the handout, where images take too much room and color is still expensive, I put all that textual information that attendees are normally scrambling to copy down from the typical PowerPoint presentation -- things like those pesky Internet URLs, pertinent quotes, phone numbers and addresses for resources, mind-boggling statistics, and so on.

Q: What advice do you have for educators who want to use more visuals in their lessons?

A: I give lots of practical, sample lessons and ideas in the Visual Literacy book and CD, and in the presentations and workshops that I do at conferences and for school districts around the country. I also point people to good, free and low-cost resources for images and video. And I remind teachers that they have 20-30 "employees" working for them who could be assigned to collect and assemble images. (As a teacher, it took me a long time to figure out that by doing all the work myself I was actually robbing my students of learning opportunities!) Now that there are digital cameras the size of a deck of cards that cost under \$300, let's get those into the hands of students!

Q: What is the role of videos in the classroom?

A: Video is the best way to bring the real world into the classroom and make the lesson relevant to the students. For example, in the award-winning video, Citizenship in the Community (from 100% Educational Videos), there are segments showing children picking up trash, recycling, cleaning their room, helping other students, and so on. Seeing other children their own age acting in exemplary ways makes a much better (and more

memorable) lesson than reading dry definitions of citizenship blandly displayed in black ink on white paper or white chalk on black boards.

Q: Do you think that too many images, too many visuals could be distracting?

A: Actually, it turns out that just the opposite is true. Some friends of mine in Michigan are using three LCD projectors and screens for a multi-sensory approach they call SuperTeaching. They are finding that students are more focused, learning faster and retaining more information.

I'm keeping an eye on their research because I think that with this kind of technology they are taking theories like Multiple Intelligences and Optimal learning to the next level.

Q: What else are you up to these days?

A: I'm working on another book and another staff development video, but my favorite thing to do is still live presentations. Just give me a coat rack and some crepe paper.

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