

Lynell Burmark, Ph.D.



October 2005
Sunnyvale, California

Excerpts
from the just-released
Visual Literacy
eBook!

From Chapter 1: Getting the picture

Visual Literacy - What is it? Why is it important?

What exactly does it mean to be visually literate? Experts offer differing opinions on this relatively recent area of study. In his presentation at the 1996 International Visual Literacy Association Conference, Jerry Christopherson said that a visually literate person should be able to:

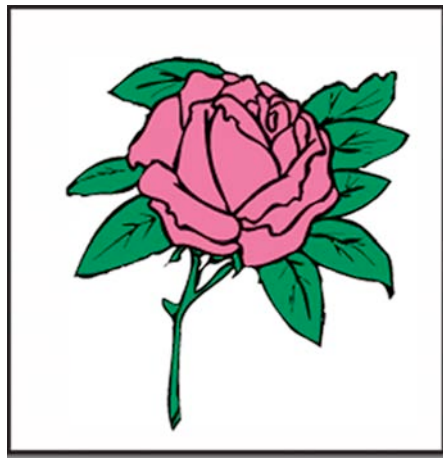
- ❖ Interpret, understand, and appreciate the meaning of visual messages;
- ❖ Communicate more effectively by applying the basic principles and concepts of visual design;
- ❖ Produce visual messages using computers and other technologies; and
- ❖ Use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems. (Page 4)

From Chapter 2: Here's looking at you

From the concrete to the abstract

Particularly for younger students, it is easier to process concrete objects and images rather than more abstract concepts like words and ideas. If our goal as teachers and presenters is to have everyone “on the same page,” everyone seeing the same image in his mind’s eye, what is the fastest and surest way to make that happen? Try this little exercise and gauge the response.

- Ask the group to create a picture in their heads when you say or display the words “pink rose.”
- Then show them a clip art image of a pink rose and ask how many saw exactly that rose.



- Then show the photograph of the rose you actually wanted them to imagine:



Again, very few people will have “seen” exactly this rose from just the words “pink rose.” (Of course, to fully experience the rose, you would have the actual flower so everyone could feel its velvety petals and inhale its sweet perfume.) (Pages 20-21)

From Chapter 3: Type, the other graphic

Second-graders’ experiment

For one of their technology-enhanced projects, the students in Jane Gerlich’s second-grade class at St. Joseph’s School in Boynton Beach, Florida, have created calendars and illustrated them with their favorite recipes. (See Chapter 8 for the step-by-step directions for making “yummy” Jell-O.) Initially, the students just typed with the default typeface. As you might imagine, Times New Roman didn’t capture the whimsy of the project. So, I suggested a little experiment: Show the students samples of four typefaces and ask them to decide which one they like the best.



Jane gave the experiment an interesting little twist. She let the students make their choice, and then she announced: “Good, then we’ll use that Old English for our recipes!”

At that point, the students protested vehemently: “You didn’t tell us we were picking for the recipes. That changes everything! We want Comic Sans!” Even in second grade, they not only knew what they liked, but also which typefaces were appropriate for which kinds of documents! (Pages 34-35)

From Chapter 4: Color power

Color me interested

Traditionally, as educators, we think of color as the decorative element for our bulletin boards: orange for Halloween, Thanksgiving and the autumn leaves; red and green for Christmas; red for Valentine’s Day, pastels for Easter and spring, and so on. But color is much more than decoration. We are biologically programmed to respond to the colors we see. When we see red, for example, our pituitary gland signals our adrenal medullas to secrete epinephrine. The epinephrine hits our bloodstream, causing blood sugar to soar. Heartbeat, breathing rate and blood pressure increase, and muscles tense. The pituitary gland doesn’t care what shades you like or what colors are “in” this season. Its response is genetically coded and completely automatic. (Pages 50-51)



From Chapter 5: Welcome to the classroom

Self-portraits

A great activity for the beginning of the school year, proposed by the Polaroid Education Program¹⁷, is “Photo Expansion.” You start with a photo of each child’s head and shoulders, and then have her “expand” the image.



These self-portraits can be hung around the room (or up and down the hallways) to help students get to learn more about each other's interests.

Another visually striking and exquisitely meaningful activity for self-portraits was introduced to me by bilingual kindergarten teacher Bev Erickson from Scott Lane Elementary School, in Santa Clara, California. Along one whole wall of her classroom, about six feet up from the floor, Bev displays a row of self-portraits drawn by her students. Her unique twist on this activity is that she asks students to draw a new portrait every month. At the bottom of each sheet, she has printed the month and year and left a space for the student's name. When October comes, the new drawing is pinned on top of the September one, and so on throughout the year. The growth in drawing skills and the increase in self-awareness and self-esteem are documented by the progression of drawings. The self-portraits clearly chart emotional growth as well as increased artistic skills. (Page 90)

From Chapter 6: Stand and deliver!

You just have to laugh

No matter what the presentation topic, humor can give us good insights as well as much needed relief from stress. Humor abounds in our daily lives if we are just on the lookout for it (and have our cameras loaded at all times). On a recent cross-country trek, my colleagues David Thornburg and Lou Fournier Marzeles decided they were going to take their guitars and "play all the big towns." From the road, they sent me the photo shown here.



They claim the whole town turned out to hear them play. That's their story, and they're sticking to it.

Self-deprecating humor, as long as it doesn't insult someone else in the audience (e.g., I don't tell "vertically challenged" jokes any more), can be a great way to break the ice. (Page 98)

Take a stand

When you are making a presentation, where do you stand from the audience's perspective and why?



- (a) to the left of the screen
- (b) to the right of the screen or
- (c) directly in front of the projector

Obviously (c) is the correct answer, because how else could you make shadow puppets? But once you're through with the shadow puppets, the correct answer is (a). Why? Because in English we read from left to right. So, especially if there is text on the screen, you want the audience to anchor on you, then read across, then come back and anchor on you, read across, and so on. Particularly if you are talking while they are reading, it can be quite distracting to have you standing on the right. (Pages 107-8)

From Chapter 7: Presentation design tips

Photographs & Photoshop

Once you buy into the idea of using more photographic images, the mad scramble for photographs begins. In Chapter 8, "The Digital Playground," we'll look at some Web sites where you can download high-quality, royalty-free images. But what if you need specific individuals or objects in your shots? What if you want the chairman of your board? He or she is no doubt willing to oblige, and is probably even photogenic.



What about a student from your school? Today, you might think you are just going to use the photo in a slide show you are presenting to the parents. Tomorrow, when that student has moved away from the district with no forwarding address – and you want to use that photograph in an article for *Educational Leadership* or the book ASCD has asked you to write – you are out of luck. The smile that lit up your classroom must remain a memory in the scrapbook on your shelf. You can't publish it without permission.

As amateur photographers, how do we take *good photographs*? Even most professional photographers will tell you that out of every 24 pictures you shoot, you maybe get three or four really good ones. Don't be discouraged. Somehow, some days you capture exactly what you need. For example, look at this photo of a church spire.



The spire is perfect, but the rest of the picture has a few problems. What is that ugly splotch in the lower left-hand corner? The image is taller than it is wide, but the computer screen is just the opposite. Can this picture be saved? Do you have Photoshop?

Here are the broad-level steps I took to edit this print for my slide show:

1. Scan/load/open the image.
2. Use Photoshop to crop and resize the photo, to achieve the right proportion, and just keep the part of the photo that highlights the spire. (For a projector with XGA resolution, you want images 1024 pixels wide by 768 pixels high.)
3. Adjust the image to saturate the colors so the image will be more striking when it's projected on the screen.
4. Save the image in a format that the slide show can import (like JPEG).

The next photo shows the result:



Obviously, I'm having fun here salvaging and tweaking the image. But as you can imagine, in cases involving people, photo editing can tread on ethically thinner ice. For example, you can take an ex-boyfriend in a photograph of the two of you and darken his five o'clock shadow to make him look sinister and evil. In the same photo, you can backlight yourself to create a subtle halo that would have just the opposite effect. By the way you set up and edit the shot, deliberately or inadvertently, you communicate your moral judgment of people in the photograph.

Apple Distinguished Educator Jerome Burg emphasizes this to students in his high school creative writing and satire classes. He points out, for example, that a close-up of a person's face reveals more of his or her character than a shot of that person taken from across the room. (As the *60 Minutes* interviewer asks his guest: "So, you lied under oath?" you can be sure the camera will zoom in on the guest's face.)

It would take me a whole book just to describe the total range of what you can do with Photoshop™. There's so much, in fact, that many courts in the United States no longer accept photographs into evidence because of the alteration possible.

I like to use Photoshop for a positive spin. All the kind people who grant me permission to use their images in my presentations or publications may request the Photoshop "5 x 5 spa treatment." They lose five pounds and five years. Pain-free. No charge. And they don't even need to take time off from work! (Pages 127-30)

From Chapter 8: Digital playground

Combining real and virtual worlds

In anticipation of the class visit to an Impressionist exhibition at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, St. Joseph's middle school French teacher Kristen Carley created an online Treasure Hunt. Students "visited" the Web Museum to uncover interesting facts about Impressionist painters, including their use of warm and cool colors.



Similarly, online research of Florida's railroads prepared Michele Fritts' fourth-grade students for a field trip to the Flagler Museum.¹³



The challenge was to collect all the research on the Flaglers, the building of the railroads, and the change in South Florida economy – and edit it into a “story” that could be scripted, digitized and shared as an electronic presentation with parents and the community. Discussing the effect and the message of each image helped students – even at this early age – with visual literacy as well as communication and presentation skills.

Many of the museums with online collections are also providing educational materials and study guides, as well as multimedia previews for classes planning to visit the actual

museums. Be sure to avail yourself of these materials, and also consider sharing the materials your classes create. (Pages 160-61)

From sea to shining sea!

Online photo galleries are of such excellent quality that they seem to transport you to the scenes they are depicting. The high-resolution images in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) online photo gallery,¹⁴ for example, are some of the best I've seen.

Students will love the tornado pictures, the ship collections, and the undersea explorations from the shallow coastlines to the depths of the ocean's abyss. Especially the younger students will be drawn to "NOAA's Ark," with its collection of marine mammal photos – "a virtual boatload of fins, fur, and feathers.



Also plan to visit the coral kingdoms of the Pacific and the Caribbean, and America's coastlines from the Aleutians to Maine. (page 161)

Eyeglasses for the mind

I think of "visual literacy" as 3-D eyeglasses for the mind. They are the lenses through which we see the meaning – the words and ideas – behind the images. When we teach our students to view images – everything from universal symbols like the stick figures on public rest room doors to artfully composed professional photographs – we are guiding them through a visual experience that takes us beyond the two dimensions of the medium itself.



Learning to articulate the real-life experiences behind photos we cherish, extracting the “storyboards” from plays, poems, and novels, students can begin to read images and words with new eyes. They can embark on travel in both directions – from pictures to words and words to pictures – and be enriched by both the outbound and the return journey. (Pages 168-9)

To purchase the *Visual Literacy* eBook, and for more visual literacy information and resources (including a free DVD of Dr. Burmark’s presentation, *The Mission of Visual Literacy*), go to: <http://visual-literacy.schoolvideos.com>

For information about the author, her presentations and publications, Web resources for images, and more, go to: <http://www.lynellburmark.org>