

In Other Languages: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Discourse

[A paper theorizing from the scholarly literature]

Patricia Holland Webb
The Pennsylvania State University

Keywords: critical pedagogy, visual discourse, literacy

Abstract: The language of visibility, despite its ubiquitous “voice” in contemporary global life, is all but ignored in education theory. This paper proposes a theoretical framework for critical pedagogic study of visual meaning structures and interpretation, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, critical theory, and notions of multiliteracy.

Introduction

It is necessary and productive to understand [that] visuals ... concern not only the ‘seen’ in text and talk, but [are also the] spectacular product of the intertwinedness of the modalities of language and image. ... An important but neglected task of critical pedagogy is engagement with visual culture and analysis of the ways [its] discourses disperse power and construct identities.... (Matthews, 2005, p. 204, 221).

One of the more interesting discussions in literacy studies involves questions of what exactly constitutes a form of “literacy.” Strict autonomous theorists are inclined to emphasize the Latin root *litter*, restricting the term to competence with alphabetic and other script-based technologies of reading and writing. A logical extension is the argument that electronic communication technologies, which are directly linked to generating and conveying texts among writers and readers, also involve types of literacy. Hence the terms: “computer literacy,” “information literacy,” and “e-literacy.” During the last quarter-century, growing acceptance of this notion has done much to perpetuate “inflationary cycles” of literacy learning along with widening literacy gaps, while also advancing the interests of dominant players on the global economic field (Brandt, 2001), which increasingly exploit text-based electronic venues to promote consumer wishes, reach ever-wider markets, and meet ever-growing profit demands.

It is curious, then – and perhaps significant, in this context – that visual images in mass communication have continued to receive so little attention in education studies, generally, and literacy studies, in particular. Clearly, visual aspects of communication do not fulfill a strict definition of *lettered* competence. Yet electronic media (even computer-generated *print* venues) now make possible such profound interweaving of text and image that the two have become not just interdependent but inseparable – a state of the art without parallel since the work of visual masters, like da Vinci’s structural studies or the engraved poetry of Blake. While such contemporary visual feats are not found only in the service of economic profit, it is noteworthy that the highly visual advertising industry is widely considered the pinnacle of this form – and carries a price tag to match.

Postman (1985, 1993) is among those who have argued forcibly that image-based communication is more primitive and intrinsically less capable than linguistic communication (whether oral or script) for generating discourse and debating complex issues. Such a position, however, overlooks the pedagogic possibility that visibility itself may comprise a type of linguistic system – a language and hence a form of literacy – one with immense capacities for generating meanings, constructing and deconstructing identities, consolidating and dispersing

power, and shaping human perception and action. If visual images are deemed to have qualities of language – if indeed they function as abstract signifiers and not only as concrete representations – then it follows that like other language they are both contextual and mediated. That is, their symbolic meanings are socially generated in particular ways at particular times in particular places, *and* these meanings are subject to being contested, re-interpreted, shaped and exploited in various ways, with varying degrees of skill, and for widely varying purposes.

Such an understanding of contemporary visual-linguistic culture implies a role for adult educators who seek alternatives to the “radical commercialization of human values” in the global marketplace and in the classroom (Smith, 2000). Rather than reducing visual aspects of discourse to “graphic design,” marginalizing them as “artsy,” or reacting against them as corruptions of “genuine” intellectual debate, we might instead approach them as a form of language much in need of critical analysis, phenomenological study, as well as pedagogic theory and research. It is my purpose in this paper to suggest a framework for such study.

Critical Resistance: The Language of Dreams

The “documentary” nature of photography and motion pictures are examples of how visual images may substitute for linguistic representations of concrete human experience, under the assumption that “reality” can be represented directly, with minimal ambiguity or interference by the difficulties involved with interpretation. Contemporary literacy studies generally reject such notions of autonomous or literal representation, grounding their work in ethnographic and constructivist views of meaning-making, which admit the necessity of interpretative activities. Deconstructive theory presses the point, however, insisting that *all* signifiers defer meaning indefinitely, no matter how “realistic” or contextually-based the sign, thus opening the way for a more extensive play of meanings and far more complex interpretive processes. The operations of visual discourse (as opposed to visual representation) seem to beg such a framework.

Whereas new literacy studies would anchor such play of meanings within the seabed of socially-constructed interpretive norms, visuality poses a challenge of another magnitude: one that is illustrated in the distinctly visual human activity of dreaming. In his classic treatise *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900, 1965) rejects both the traditional literacy approach of *decoding*, “a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning, in accordance with a fixed key” (p.130) as well as *symbolic* methods that, he contends, “break down when faced by dreams which are not merely unintelligible but also [internally contradictory and] confused” (p.129). A central insight and a major intellectual landmark of this treatise is Freud’s attribution to the dreamer of the power of interpretation. “The technique I describe,” he writes, “imposes the task of interpretation upon the dreamer himself [sic]. It is not concerned with what occurs to the *interpreter* ... but with what occurs to the *dreamer*” (p.130). Thereafter, he adds:

My procedure is not so convenient as [a method] which translates any given piece of a dream’s content by a fixed key. I, on the contrary, am prepared to find that *the same piece of content may conceal a different meaning when it occurs in various people or in various contexts.* (p.137; emphasis added)

If such a “procedure” would throw into confusion traditional literacy learning, it is not quite chaos theory and bears surprising parallels to the Freirean literacy framework of problem-posing education (1970), which begins with “what occurs to” the *learner*, in relation to a teacher who is now “no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students...” (p.80). Indeed, Freire was deeply influenced by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm,

who once characterized Freire's educational practice as "a kind of historic-socio-cultural and political psychoanalysis" (Freire, 1994, p.90).

In the decades since Freire's work, educational theorists have drawn increasingly on psychoanalytic concepts. A detailed comparative critique by Fenwick (2000) reviews five contemporary perspectives on learning and experience, among them explorations of psychoanalytic theory by Britzman (1998), Felman (1987), Pinar (1992) and Grumet (1992). In this view, Fenwick states, learning is understood as the active "interference of conscious thought by the unconscious," which is characterized by Britzman as having a "grammar" that is "strange and dreamy; [that] resists its own unveiling" and is "a kind of unmeant knowledge ... spoken by the language of the subject, but that the subject cannot recognize..." (Britzman, 1998, as cited in Fenwick, 2000, p.251-2). Such a language is found to be heavily visual: indeed, psychoanalytic theory posits that the primary language of dreams – visual images – is among the strategies used by the unconscious in its efforts to "speak" unknown meanings yet "conceal" meanings that create anxiety or fear. It is a grammar capable of confusing and contradicting the impositions of conscious thought so as to resist its imperial demands. Thus, Fenwick suggests, the value of the visually-literate unconscious voice lies in its ability to "disrupt notions of ... [the] certainty of knowledge and the centered individual learner" while opening paths of enquiry into "our resistance to knowledge, the desire for closure and mastery ... and enigmatic tensions between learner, knowledge, and educator" (p.250-51).

Although contradictions of meaning are central to transformative learning theory in the notion of "disorienting dilemmas," the evolution of that framework has not coherently integrated alternative types of discourse into its articulation of critical reflection or perspective transformation. An especially widely-noted problem with transformative theory as articulated by Mezirow and associates is its emphasis on consciously-mediated processes of critical reflection expressed primarily through linguistic discourse. Yet reviews of neurobiological research as well as of transformative learning studies (Taylor, 2001, 1997), confirm the extent to which learning is not altogether conscious nor linguistically-mediated. Such literature illustrates the particular interdependence of conscious thought on both affective and implicit (unconscious) processes, as well as the role of social contexts, somatic experiences, and alternative intelligences (or languages) that have only begun to be theorized (Randall, 1999). The role of visuality, however, remains entirely uncharted.

A critical analysis of nonviolent communication by Gorsevski (1999) concurs in several areas, although approached from a perspective of rhetorical studies and critical theory. Gorsevski explores ways in which visuality, even within *written* narrative, operates to confuse, contradict and resist dominant structures of social practices and assumptions. Tolstoy's depictions of structural violence in late 19th century Russian culture, for example (like Dickens portrayals of English life), exposed unjust distributions of power and resources, while revealing the abused rhetoric that accompanies such conditions, wielded through multiple veils of privilege against the weak. Yet, discourse itself is not without contradictions: Gorsevski raises Foucault's argument that discourse can be a strategy of the powerful, assuming Foucault's understanding of the term as something linguistically, socially and historically constructed. The cure she offers, however, derives from another understanding of discourse – that of visuality, the language and grammar of the unconscious. As in psychoanalytic theory, this is a counter-discourse: a nonlinear and contradictory, at times even unintelligible form of "speech" that creates openings for "creative disorder," forces she claims are capable of disrupting "structurally

violent systems of repression” (Gorsevski, p. 455). Such operations, which psychoanalysis locates within the unconscious, Gorsevski locates within the powerful visual images and sense impressions generated by great narrative art.

Multiliteracy: Learning to Talk Back

With Matthews’ (2005) analysis of visual culture, multi-literacies and critical discourse analysis, the framework I outline here is brought full-circle. Matthews provides an uncommonly incisive critique of the crucial role visuality plays in nearly all forms of public discourse – observations which are given urgency by their central role in contemporary global discourses on “terrorism,” “human rights,” “national security” and “freedom.” Not limiting her discussion to visual characteristics of print-based communication, Matthews (like Gorsevski) encompasses the power of language to evoke powerful visual images – but also to play with images and extend them through analogy, allusion and tropes, as well as to summon a constellation of associations through “media bite” aphorisms like “axis of evil” or “Operation Enduring Freedom.” Far from being primitive or incapable of complex abstraction, Matthews argues that such visuality

... point[s] to things previously left unsaid or unseen by making surprising and often complicated associations between abstract ideas. ... [An image] makes its point through a direct and immediately intelligible visuality that simultaneously allows for ambiguity and multiple interpretations. ... [Thus] visuals, whether straightforwardly spectacular ... or more tangential ... work on a similar and remarkably effective pedagogical plane ... [one that is] *wholly untheorized in education research*. (p.212-214, emphasis added.)

Matthews’ concern is not just academic. Like Smith (2000), who warns educators away from complicity in the seductive vision of education for “endless and endlessly-variegated consumption, which is the necessary flip-side of endless and endlessly-variegated production ... an absurd and futile vision” (p.14), Matthews contends that adult education must break free from its ties to capitalist economic development and establish a larger cultural agenda of its own. Critical engagement with multiliteracy and visual discourse, she claims, is central to doing so.

The term “multiliteracies” refers in a broad sense to the impact of new economic and cultural conditions on literacy. ... Theoretically, multiliteracies goes [sic] beyond the micro analysis of text, language, and images undertaken in linguistics to highlight the way symbolic forms reflect, represent, and constitute social entities. ... I want to argue that ... *old and new forms of violent international relations demand that multiliteracies enlarge its concern*. ... Literacy teaching and the new technologies are not neutral mechanistic adaptations to predetermined rapid economic and technological change, but products of particular and specific Western histories and politics. (p.210-211; emphasis added.)

If the power of advertising or the mystery of our dreams give any clue to the significance of visual language, then theorizing a critical pedagogy of visual discourse is a task as complex and difficult as it is important. To succeed, we may need to reach farther afield; to wrestle with contradictory purposes; to risk disordered, even unintelligible thoughts; and be willing, occasionally, to change our minds. In Matthews’ words:

If we want a future other than the one we project, then it is necessary to go beyond the idea of literacy for efficient economic globalization and consider [multi-]literacy for a desirable future.... ...[E]ngagement with visual culture and analysis of the ways [its]

discourses disperse power and construct identities ... [is one means by which] we can explore ... [and] expose how identities and truths about ourselves and others are established, challenged, and resisted” (p. 211, 221).

Ultimately, the task prepares us to do more than to theorize, engage and explore. It makes it possible for us and for our students to speak the language, to talk with, and to talk back.

References

- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fenwick, T. (2000). Expanding conceptions of experiential learning: A review of the five contemporary perspectives on cognition. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(4), 243-272.
- Freire, P. (1970, 1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York: Continuum.
- Freud, S. (1900, 1965). *The interpretation of dreams*. New York: Discus.
- Gorsevski, E. W. (1999). Nonviolent theory on communication: The implications for theorizing a nonviolent rhetoric. *Peace & Change*, 24(4), 445-476.
- Matthews, J. (2005). Visual culture and critical pedagogy in “terrorist times”. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26(2), 203-224.
- Postman, N. (1985, 2005). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Postman, N. (1993). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. New York: Vintage.
- Smith, D.G. (2000). “The specific challenges of globalization for teaching and vice versa,” *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 46(1), 7-26.
- Randall, W.L. (1999). Narrative intelligence and the novelty of our lives. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13(1), 11-39.
- Taylor, E.W. (1997). Building on the theoretical debate: A critical review of the empirical studies of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 34-60.
- Taylor, E.W. (2001). Transformative learning theory: A neurobiological perspective on the role of emotions and unconscious ways of knowing. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20(3), 218-236.
- Wentz, L. (2007). “21st Annual: Global Marketers: Who spends the most worldwide?” Retrieved March 14, 2008 from <http://adage.com/images/random/datacenter/2007/globalmarketing2007.pdf>.