

VISUAL ARCHAEOLOGISTS

PRACTICE VISUAL READING
"SEEING THROUGH"
ARTIFACTS

TO
EXCAVATE AND NARRATE CONTENT
(Visual Literacy training, Susan Mareneck, 2006)



☞ LEARN TO READ AN OBJECT AS A TEXT.

☞ FIND MEANING AND CONNECTION IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD.

CHOOSE HISTORICAL, SCIENTIFIC, TECHNOLOGICAL OR CULTURAL
ARTIFACTS TO DISCOVER LAYERS OF MEANING EMBODIED IN THE FORM.

- **Site-specific** visual literacy training.
- Short-term intensive, building vocabulary and **grammar of seeing**.
- Broad-based - useful **across disciplines**.
- **Student-centered** – choice of subject.
- Incorporates **Design vocabulary** and grammar.
- Builds **analytical skills**: evidence-based observation and interpretation.
- Utilizes **research and narrative strategies** of engagement with **primary sources**.
- **Strategies that transfer across content-areas** *from (but not limited to) COMPUTER SCREENS, HISTORICAL OBJECTS, SPORTS EQUIPMENT, SCIENTIFIC, FORENSIC OBSERVATIONS, PERFORMANCE, FASHION, CONTEMPORARY ART, INFORMATION RESOURCES (MAPS, CHARTS, GRAPHS), LANDSCAPE DESIGN/ CITY-PLANNING to MEDICAL DIAGNOSTIC PRACTICE.*

KNOWING HOW TO READ WHAT IS SEEN ALLOWS STUDENTS TO NEGOTIATE MEANING IN AN INCREASINGLY VISUAL WORLD OF COMMUNICATION. DIALOGUE ILLUMINATING TRADITIONAL VISUAL FORMS AND PRACTICES EVOLVES FROM THE STUDENT'S EXPLORATORY PROCESS. NAMING ASPECTS OF FORM AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THEM, GIVES LANGUAGE FOR CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING, ENABLES AND EMPOWERS ACTIVE VIEWING.

Practicing a strategy of looking that derives from a personal interest allows each student to be in charge of his/her investigation. Teachers can adapt to available time frame. Utilizing relevant subject matter enhances visual skill and content development simultaneously whether teaching reading, writing, science, history, math or cultural studies.

Education professionals can benefit as well, extending their knowledge and understanding of the multilayered meaning found in visual communication.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR VISUAL LITERACY

BACKGROUND - By the mid 1990's I had been teaching art to various grades in New York City Independent Schools for more than a decade. It became clear to me that my students had changed significantly in response to the world. In many of their lives, leisure time and intimate experience of the physical world were diminished. In the past ten years such trends have solidified and accelerated. Students and parents now demand to be given strategies for the acquisition of generic skills used by those who have met with success in a discipline or activity. Individuality has lost its lustre in an environment where a sense of urgency is pervasive. There is "no time" to figure out a personal approach, even though we know it is the synthesis of skill with self-knowledge, creating a unique application of the known with the incalculable, which is equated with "greatness". Unfortunately, the speed at which information is spread now dictates, often curtails, our process of knowing deeply, connecting holistically.

Education, at all levels, is under the sway of the virtual, believing it to be a suitable and efficient substitute for actual experience. Primary sources may be consulted but usually through reproduction. We know that television does not equal theater, that a recording never is the same experience as being in a concert hall nor a slide or digital projection the equivalent to standing in front of a work of art. Even the diorama, long the virtual medium for presenting natural history par excellence, is succumbing to the loss of the physical as painted backgrounds are being replaced with video projections so that the movements and changes of nature can be simulated more closely. A more convincing simulation but not the same as breathing desert or arctic air!

The trend has been evolving since the 1950's when film became an important narrative and educational tool. What has been missing in the previous half century is an equally rigorous training in visual skill sets. Without a vocabulary and grammar for understanding information obtained visually, students are left to their own devices and abilities. Those for whom right brain activities are natural glean more, but have no language or evaluative tools with which to measure understanding. Others remain clueless with regard to the complexity of visual communication.

Since the virtual realm is not going away, it is time to enable students to be smart readers of what they see. **Using a process of learning to read an object as a text, excavating meaning by analyzing and comparing evidence, while learning the vocabulary and grammar of seeing, students can also be given the gift of time to be with things they find compelling in their world, whether the world of the classroom or the street.**

Contemplating a scientific specimen, athletic gear, electronic gadget or historical artifact, by combining observation with research while using design vocabulary & organizing principles to practice visual analysis, can enable individuals (students or adults) to excavate content and meaning in what they see. Investing time to learn a process for deconstructing layers of connection to technology, history or culture, skill building is not segregated from the content area being taught. **Modeling an integrated approach to research and conceptual understanding, "Visual Archaeologists" experience the physical world in a meaningful way while building analytical skills and acquiring content.** Individual insights are nurtured through questions that build upon observations. By focusing on objects chosen by students, multi-dimensional attention is built.

Now that education is focused on questions that need to be asked to create meaning from the plethora of information available, learning to discern significance, to discover connection through a variety of research media, to draw conclusions based on primary and secondary sources and to express them using precise language is a crucial ability. We are confronted with information on an increasing scale - from computer screens to video games to advertising to art media to power point presentations to business graphics. There is no denying that major cultural narratives are now communicated visually. We owe it to ourselves - but especially to our children - to be visually literate, skillful interpreters of our shared earthly communion - seeing into cross-cultural physical and virtual worlds with increasing insight and understanding.

(Cross-cultural issue critical - *How to understand what you are presented with if you have no cultural clues?* With conceptual tools and language to analyze what you see, you can make connections to familiar representations/ cultural symbols.)

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NYC

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• **PROGRAM OUTLINE - "Excavating meaning in Material Culture"**

10 Days: Introduction to archaeological methods (object/context) and design vocabulary (elements/principles), Selection*, Investigating/ Observing, Researching contextual similarities ("homeopathy"), Developing questions: Uses?, Materials? (connection to nature)?, Express human relationship? Value? (Using Asian, African, Native American, and European systems.) Practicing concepts/ terminology for visual analysis.

- Selection depends on academic context. If being applied in a subject area such as math or science in the context of specific subject matter, students would choose between a given set of options.
- If a cultural studies (humanities) context, students might be given a range of choices from book or street knowledge. Ownership of investigation is important. Empathy and relationship building are goals of the process in addition to specific analytical skills. Excavating an individual relationship to a cultural artifact, articulating meaningful questions and discovering personal insight are goals.

Product could take a variety of forms: written, visual, combination in a book, collection or mixed media object representing research, analysis and interpretation.

Assessment would be contingent of specifics of application and developed with students.

• **ONE DAY WORKSHOP FOR EDUCATORS - "How to apply Visual Archaeologists methodology in age/ subject appropriate format."**
(8 hours), Materials, coaching and follow-up provided. \$2,500.

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