

Using the Visual Environment as Access to Literacy: Tools for Teachers

by Dr. Lori Phillips

I will never forget my first reader. It was titled *Fun with John and Jean*. The first page said, “Look, look.” I was proud to be able to read these words. I loved the images of John and Jean’s adventures. Not until recently did I realize why the author had chosen these words for the first pages and why they were so important. Looking and seeing is a powerful way for young children to learn. Observing and talking about what they see helps children understand their world and how they fit into it. The visual environment—what we see when we look—can be used to develop both visual and verbal literacy, including aesthetic appreciation, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Some research, including Bruce’s 1998 book *Young Children and the Arts*, indicates that the quality of young children’s artistic and aesthetic experiences improves with adequate time, space, and some adult intervention. What might this intervention look like? Aesthetic intervention, whether in adults or young children, requires creating an environment and process to slow down and really see. According to Edwards’ 1979 book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, whether looking at fine art or a beautiful

leaf, the objective is the same: taking time, looking, describing, and suspending judgment.

Teachers and parents can use simple techniques to slow down the process of seeing and promote looking, describing, analyzing, and interpreting. This is sometimes known as building an allusionary or image base. Whether it’s a McDonald’s sign, an ad on television, a painting, or a breadfruit, we are confronted with a visual message that can be read. Literacy is not just reading words, but reading our visual environment. By looking, describing, analyzing, and judging, we build our allusionary base to understand what we see and build connections to our world. By speaking, listening, writing, and reading we build our vocabulary, which leads to comprehension, and ultimately to literacy.

The following two processes can be used in the classroom by many educators to slow down the visual process for looking at art. The first is for looking at images and the second is for looking at objects in the environment. These processes help students to look closely and describe in words the image or object in front of him or her, suspending judgment for later.

Making Meaning with Art

Step 1 Initial Response

(Ask for one word or a short statement; repeat what is said.)

- What do you think about this image?
- What is your initial reaction?
- What is the first thing you thought when you saw it?

Step 2 Description

(Describe the art piece in front of you; pretend you’re describing it to a blind person.)

- Start with, “I see _____.”
- What else is there?
- What is it made of?
- What elements of art are used (line, shape, color, texture, value, other expressive qualities)?

Continued at the top of page 17

Note. Image from *Fun with John and Jean* (p. 6), by J. A. O’Brien, 1952, Chicago: Scott Foresman. Copyright 1952 by Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted with permission.



Using the Visual Environment

Continued from the bottom of page 16

- Make up a narrative or story about this piece (who might be walking in the door; what time of day it is).

Step 3 Analysis

- How are the “elements of art” (line, shape, color, texture, value) used in this image?
- Choose one of the elements, line, shape, color, or texture, and ask, “How it is used in this piece?”
- Where does the artist want you to look (focal point)?
- How is light used to create mood? Color?

Step 4 Interpretation

- What do you think the person in the painting is feeling?
- What is he or she thinking?
- What mood do you think the artist was trying to express?
- How does this piece make you feel?
- What emotion is best expressed in the piece?
- What’s going on in this piece?
- What do you think the artist was trying to express?

Step 5 Judgment

- How do you feel about this piece now?
- Do you feel differently than when you first saw it?
- How has your feeling for it changed? Would you like to own it?
- Would you like to see more of this artist’s work?

Using these same steps, one can use similar questions to look more closely at interesting objects within the child’s environment.

Making Meaning with the Visual Environment

- Initial Response: What do you think? What is it?
- Description: Describe it. What does it smell like? What does it feel like?
- Analysis: Tell me about its shapes, color, and texture.
- Connection: What else is this like? What do you know about this object?
- Judgment: Would you like to find more of these objects? Have you seen anything that is the same but different?

These conversations help children observe the essence of the objects in front of them, and can improve aesthetic appreciation, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Look and See: Making Meaning By Drawing

If one wishes to trace visual thinking in images, one must look for well-structured shapes and relation which characterize concepts and their applications. They are readily found in the work done at early levels of mental development, for example in the drawing of young children. (Arnheim, Visual Thinking, 1969, p. 255)

Children’s understanding of their world and what is important to them is often best described in their drawings. By asking children to draw what they see—not what they think they see—you offer them the opportunity to slow down and really look. The following is a description of how to offer children this type of opportunity:

Give children dark colored pencils or felt tip pens and ask them to carefully observe objects in their environment. Describe the shape and texture of each object with lines. Talk to children about using “confident lines” and visually describing using lots of detail. The role of the teacher is often only to ask, “What else do you know about this object or event?” “Show me more.” “I understand the shape of your object but I’m wondering how you will show how it felt.” (texture) “What else was there?” “What is missing?”

The goal is to create drawings that demonstrate the same clarity that is often achieved in talking about an object or event. Looking and seeing, talking and drawing, and moving from image to word and word to image, all help children in language development and constructing meaning and, ultimately, improve literacy. According to Lilian Katz in the 1998 book *The Hundred Languages of Children*, edited by Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, children should be engaged in multiple ways of showing what they know in the quest for deeper understanding of the world around them.

Look and See: Materials Developed by Children

When children are offered opportunities to talk, draw, and read about their visual environment, their creative ability and their interest will peak. In the Pacific, reading materials in the vernacular are needed. Children’s drawings and paintings are useful resources for creating colorful culturally appropriate materials in the first language. The *Island Alphabet Books* series, published by Pacific Resources for Education and Learning and Bess Press, uses illustrations created by Pacific children to create first language readers.

“Look and see” how exciting using the visual environment in your classroom can be!

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