Creative approaches to optimize narrative writing skills and visual literacy: local history tales through pictures and comics

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Abstract
In this paper we describe our effort to combine various techniques and methods in order to enhance students' writing skills and at the same time to develop their visual literacy and to encourage their creativity. Taken into account that the established language- based literacy pedagogy and the traditional methodology proves itself on the one hand, ineffective and on the other, inadequate, under the current cultural circumstances, with the dominant presence of multimodality, we propose a lesson plan, which is based on a multi- dimensional concept of literacy, including creativity. The main underpinning theories are: interdisciplinary approach, process writing, writing across the curriculum, iconology, grammar of visual design and dual coding approach.
With the emphasis shifted from genre as product to genre as process, students play with the technologies of genre, text, grammar and pictures in a creative fashion and even more they create their own visual narratives. In addition,, the starting point of our teaching was a theme from local history (medieval times in Rhodes) which triggered their interest and helped them investigate the historical era and also acquire knowledge about it.

Key words: writing skills, visual literacy, creativity, local history

The need for interdisciplinary, multimodal teaching approaches and the expansion of the concept of literacy

In the twenty-first century the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines have been crossed and interdisciplinary studies gain ground and become the dominant teaching paradigm. At the same time, the notion of literacy is being reconceived, as a plurality of new literacies emerges and being traditionally literate is seen as anachronistic.

Education, at the crossroads of the new era, tries to respond to the new demands. A "factory-model school" is not accepted any more. .... "Education is not a passive process of pouring facts and attitudes into an empty vessel; it is an active, dynamic, interactive process, in which students learn not just because they have good teachers, but because they are motivated, because they are part of a team. (Doyle, 1992, 520). So, new terms imbue educational theory and influence teaching practices: interactivity, collaboration, motivation. Even more, since education does not stand on a cultural vacuum, it has to take into account the changes that constitute its referential frame, which is mainly dominated by multimodality. The capacity of computer-based texts to easily include and manipulate images from a variety of sources has further emphasized the significance of visual literacy in 'reading' images and text (Bolter, 1998).

From television to films to magazines to the internet--we are saturated with it. Yet, in schools, many educators persist in teaching a one-dimensional concept of literacy, while students learn to negotiate their out-of-school experiences with multimodal texts. The textual environment which affects us and which we affect, has experienced remarkable changes, as the students we teach, grow to adulthood. While many of the fundamentals of established, language-based literacy pedagogy remain necessary, they are by no means sufficient for the development of contemporary dominant literacy practices. Many instances can be cited from the professional literature and from everyday experience of children intensely involved in multimodal textual practices outside their school experience, which are rarely reflected or acknowledged as part of school literacies. (Green and Bigum 1993; Mackey 1994; Smith et al. 1996). This happens even though in the 1980s and 1990s images have come to assume more prominence relative to print in school texts and texts of popular culture (Kress 1995b; 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Quin et al. 1997a).

Yet, in the average classrooms students are not provided with the strategies to make sense of the vast array of multimodal ensembles they encounter. Most instructional programs concentrate exclusively on written language, which is privileged. Even more, advanced textbooks addressed their readers as no longer needing pictures and as having acquired the abstract and impersonal attitude that characterizes higher learning in Western culture (Kress, Van Leeuwen, 1996, 90)

Nevertheless, since there is no avoiding the multimodal nature of dominant and emerging cultural sites (Duncum, 2004, 259), students need to know how to make and get meaning from all these modes alone and integrated together. No single mode can completely express any particular concept or meaning (Kress, 2010). Anyone who cannot handle multimodality nowadays, is considered to be illiterate. The current focus on multimodality of course, has been referred to as "the discovery of the obvious" (Stockl, 2007), because researchers and educators ultimately recognized the thoroughly multimodal nature of all texts and discourses. So, there is a call for the expansion of the instructional frameworks to include visual literacy skills (Richardson, 2009; Albers, 2008), as the world we live in, is becoming more visual than verbal (Gombrich, 1961)

To conclude with, if schools are to foster the development of the changing concept of literacy, it is necessary to include not only the affordances of computer technology but also the increasing prominence of images in both electronic and conventional formats and the differentiation of the distinctive literacy demands of different school curriculum areas (Unsworth, 2001, 8)

Researchers have argued the need for a retheorization of textual communication to include the multimodal nature of contemporary texts (Lemke 1998a; 1998b; Rassool, 1999; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000 (Frazer, 1960)). However, the reading of images has up to date received little systematic attention in school curricula.

An effort to define image and its relation to mental process
The word idea comes from the Greek word "to see" and is frequently linked with the notion of the eidolon, the visible image. Aristotle in De Anima (II 12424a) argues that sense is that which is the receptive of the form of sensible objects without the matter, just as the wax receives the impression of the signet ring without the iron or the gold. Imagination is the power of reproducing these impressions in the absence of sensory stimulation. Wittgenstein elaborated the picture theory in his Tractatus Logico- Philosophicus (first German edition 1921) and later in his Philosophical Investigations (1953) he corrected himself by conceding that we may have

mental images associated with thought or speech, which should not be thought as metaphysical immaterial entities but as real images. He claimed that the pictures which reside in language are translations, isomorphisms, structural homologies which obey a system of rules of translation. (Mitchell, 1986, 21). Nevertheless pictures in language, whether they are projected in the mind's eye or in paper, are not unmediated copies of any reality but artificial, conventional signs. Of course its hard to put mental and physical images in the same category. Verbal imagery is a metaphor for metaphor itself. We speak of verbal imagery either as figurative and ornamented language, or also as the way a proposition works: like "a tableau vivant ...presents a state of affairs" (Tractatus 4.0311).This leads towards the view of poetic language as literal, nonmetaphoric expression (Kenner, 1959, 38). This idea goes back to the 17th century (Frazer, 1960) and is based on the common assumption that mental images have been impressed on us by the experience of objects. The consequence of this sort of language theory is the understanding of the art of language as the art of reviving the original impression of sense. Different epistemological paradigms through time expressed variations on the subject.

Two things strike the notice of anyone who tries to take a general view of the phenomena called by the name of imagery. The first is the variety of things that go by this name and the second is that the calling of all these things by the name of image does not necessarily mean that they all have something in common. If images are a family, we come up with a family tree like this:

Image: graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal (Mitchell, 1986, 10). Mental images are not exclusively visual the way real pictures are. They involve all the senses. Verbal imagery moreover can involve all the senses, or it may involve no sensory component at all, sometimes suggesting nothing more than a recurrent abstract idea like grace or evil. From a picture to its pictogram, then to its ideogram and finally to its phonetic sign, we displace gradually the original picture with a figure of speech, technically a synechdoche or metonymy. So the relation between image and text is a complex one of mutual translation, interpretation and enlightment. But before we try to interweave text and pictures, we foremost have to learn to read pictures first.

Word- image relations and their "complicity" in learning
Perceptual psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim (2004, 6) argued that over time, society has come to overvalue cognition at the expense of perception. For Arnheim (1985, 1-15), cognition is the mind's manipulation of concepts resulting from direct perception of objects, people, images, etc. He contends that cognition is bound to perception; therefore, historically determined dichotomies between seeing and thinking, perception and reason, are damaging to full cognitive development. According to Arnheim (1986, 232-33), verbal language, which has come to represent cognition and imagery, tends to be perceptual and is deficient in the sense that the verbal is actually an abstracted aural symbol that, lacks a referent. For example, the printed word "cat" does not visually resemble a cat (the image lacks any consistent symbol, i.e., a cat is a cat, because it is identified as such via language). In order to cognitively process the idea of "cat," we must have an idea of what a cat looks like. In order to conceive such concepts, a person must create a visual representation utilizing symbolic imagery (Marantz, 1978, 74). Therefore, verbal language and visual imagery are complementary and provide what the other lacks. This relationship strengthens both the perception and the resultant cognition. Arnheim (1986, 296) claims that once this connection is realized the need for art to have a central role in general education will be evident." Consequently, language is not just a cognitive medium but also a perceptual medium

employing imagery. Therefore, there are many similarities between deriving meaning from a text versus from an image. Barthes in his essay `Rhetoric of the Image" (1977), argued that because images are polysemous they are dependent on the verbal text which exercises a function of control over the potential meanings of the image. While the word "image" may, as Roland Barthes (1979) has stated, be close to its latin source imitari (to imitate), implying a frozen moment in which a match between reality and representation is achieved, it also implies that it is an action or process in which several ingredients come together and act dynamically within its frame. In this latter sense, the image comes closer to the notion of text, that is something that can be explained in itself (Snaders, 1988,140).

Barthes also introduced the concept of elaboration, when the same meanings are restated in different ways and the concept of anchorage (Barthes 1977, 38), when linguistic elements can serve to 'anchor' (or constrain) the preferred readings of an image, actually serving to define the terms of reference and point-of-view from which it is to be seen (Chaplin 1994, 270). Barthes used also the term relay to describe text/image relationships which were 'complementary', where the text extends the meaning of the image.

On the other hand, Kress and van Leeuwen emphasized the independent nature of visual communication starting from the assumption that `visual communication has its own grammar, that images are amenable to rational accounts and analysis and that language and visual communication both realize the same fundamental and far-reaching systems of meaning that constitute our culture, each by means of its own specific forms and independently' (1990, 4).

Either we think of the relation between text and image as an independent or as a collaborative one, images, ever since Comenius discovered their significance, are believed to have an inherent instructional quality (Epstein, 1991, 2). Paivio (1971) who coined the "dual coding theory", used the idea that the formation of mental images aids in learning. He postulates that both visual and verbal information is used to represent information (Sternberg, 2006). There are two ways a person could expand on learned material: verbal associations and visual imagery.

Presuppositions and theoretical tools for reading images at school
It is unfortunately true that most discussion of children's instructional books has either ignored their visual elements altogether or else treated the pictures as objects of a traditional sort of art appreciation rather than narrative elements (Nodelman,1988: ix). Nodelman argued that, from this perspective, we might best understand images in picture books 'in the light of some form of semiotic theory', which suggests the possibility of a system underlying visual communication that is something like a grammar - something like the system of relationships and contexts that makes verbal communication possible. (Nodelman, 1988: ix). Analysing the means by which images make meanings, helps the children feel they are getting closer to the texts (Nodelman 1988: 37; Misson 1998: 108). An analytical approach also increases young readers' interest in critical appreciation of the texts they encounter.

His remarks point to Kress and Van Leeuwen's theory of the three metafunctions, that are to be detected in images, which are:
  x.   the ideational meta-function that involves the representation of objects and their relations in the material world; .
  xi. the interpersonal meta-function that involves the nature of the relationships among the interactive participants; .

xii. and the textual meta-function which deals with the ways in which linguistic and/or visual signs can cohere to form texts.

In other words every image embodies a way of seeing and contains instructions about how to view it (Berger 1972).

Image- text collaboration to enhance narrative skills and visual literacy
For children to acquire a language, short stories have the undeniable value of providing the necessary meaning- making context. The use of pictures illustrating the narrative can facilitate the writing process by making the writing of the story not only meaningful but also memorable.

Toolan observes that:
"the business of experiencing and understanding the implications of text- scene matching, which all illustrated stories nurture, is a crucial step to the more decontextualised story, the one with text alone, where the child is required to produce in his/her own mind, using /hisher imaginative resources, satisfying mental pictures of what is going on". (1988, 211)

When text and image are presented simultaneously to children, the image will surely first engage their attention. The challenge lies in discovering a pedagogic approach that exhorts children to attend to the written text, as well so that they develop the capacity to construct interrelations between image and text and reach an understanding of the meanings conveyed by both.

In school text books, pictures are either conceptual or presentational. Conceptual images are those images that represent the meaning of a participant, its stable and visible essence, and define it as a member of a class. These images often have a didactic function as they serve to explain what things are like. Presentational images, on the other hand, deal with actions and events, rather than with generalized essences. Their main function is to show a particular moment in time, a particular event, and can be mainly found in stories and recounts. In picture-narratives, conceptual and presentational images occur together due to the medium of expression. Chatman (1978) states that a verbal narrative may elect not to present some visual aspect such as a character's clothes or physical appearance but in visual narratives the presentation of these features is inevitable. In short, conceptual images in picture-narratives can be said to communicate features of character (identity, attributes and ownership) and features of setting (in time and place) while the function of presentational images is to make sense of represented events and communicate a variety of processes.

As we already mentioned three metafunctions compose the pictorial code. In our teaching approach we give emphasis on various elements of each meta-function: the participants of the image, the processes they participate in and the circumstances under which processes take place. We also examine the textual meta-function to comprehend how words and images cohere and construct meaning.

Writing as a process and across the curriculum
Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) refers to the pedagogical and curricular approach to writing occurring in classes other than those offered by composition or writing Programs. The movement provided systematic encouragement and educational knowledge to increase the amount and quality of writing occurring in courses as history, science, mathematics and sociology (Bazerman et al., 2005, 9). On the other hand, writing process instruction is process

oriented and encourages young writers to discover for themselves the mechanics of composition. We tried to combine both movements, by creating a blended teaching frame for process writing through history learning.

We decided to teach narrative with the aid of local history, and we invented a story that took place in medieval times in Rhodes. This was a trick to trigger their interest and prompt them investigate the historical era and acquire knowledge about it as well. This proposal was applied to a 7 grade class and its duration was 5 hours.

We formatted our class as a writing workshop, so that students engaged themselves for the majority of their time. Class periods looked like mini lessons, followed by student involvement in the writing process. Of course, the pieces of the writing process differed, depending on the type of writing being done. In between, they had the chance to look for information about the period in the web in order to enrich their writing with appropriate vocabulary and convincing details. At the preparatory stage, we read several short texts and taught the basics about narrative writing: the grammatical features, like action verbs, past tense, temporal connectives, or other types of words needed to sequence all the different pieces of information (conjunctions, adverbs) as well as the structure of a narrative: characters, time, place (orientation stage), sequence of events (problems, obstacles) and resolution. We divided the classroom into teams of four members.
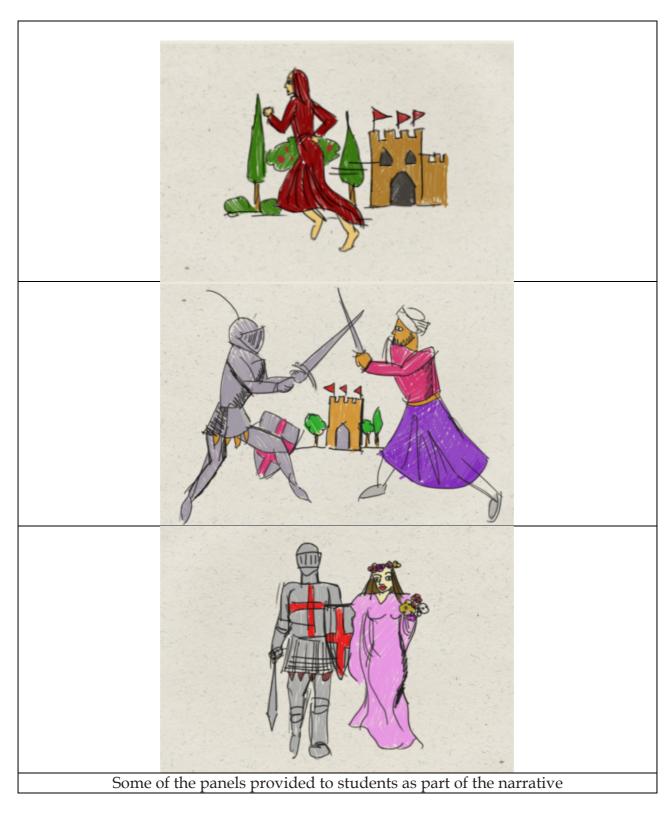
During prewriting, the first step of the writing process, authors generated ideas and put their thoughts in order. We shaped a scaffold of the prewriting experience step by step.

We started with the technique of the mind web. We showed students some pictures of Rhodes' medieval town and they guessed the topic. Then we wrote it on the center of the blackboard and we suggested a brainstorming, where students connected related ideas. From the central topic, the ideas connected directly to it, represented paragraphs in a draft, and the bubbles connected to these became ideas that supported the paragraph. Then, we asked students, to do some wet- ink, a pre- writing exercise, and write within 5 minutes a small paragraph about any topic that had been suggested and related to Medieval Rhodes.

Afterwards, we delivered them a comics' page template, whose panels were partly drawn and partly left blank, no words included and we asked students to write a speech bubble for the character(s) and a descriptive sentence below the given drawings. Then, we asked them to fill in the gaps of the story, following their imagination, taking into account the prerequisites of the narrative arc. They could add as many panels as they wished, provided the story they created were logically coherent. The graphic template with the partly illustrated scenes functioned as an organizer and helped students visualize the events.

We proposed them the following stages:
1. Write a draft summary of their story
2. Write the script, describe persons, places, time, atmosphere, emotions and some dialog elements
3. Make the decoupage split the script into scenes and decide about the pace of the narrative (two columns: on the first, write the directing instructions and the content of the image and on the other the exact dialogues)
4. Decide the layout of their pages (divide the page into panels (preferably from 3-9)
5. Design the characters and place the words in the balloons.

Some of the panels provided to students as part of the narrative

Prewriting in the form of a picture-by-picture comic strip proved itself useful. Not only students defined the flow of events in their piece, but they were also motivated by enjoying the process. It encouraged students to avoid getting caught up in the artwork—while they used the drawings as the purpose of organizing writing, not an end unto themselves (Sundem, 2006, 46).

After they had created their own comics, we encouraged students to narrate the events in detail.

Right after, teams exchanged their writings and they evaluated each other's narratives, using the following criteria (which were flexible according to the pre-set goals):

xiii.   is the recount organised in logical and/or meaningful paragraphs?

xiv.   does the text use a range of simple, compound and complex sentence structures?

xv.   is the choice of tense appropriate and consistently maintained?

xvi.   does the text make appropriate use of a variety of connectives?

xvii.   does the text mainly recount and/or use setting and characterization to enhance the recount?

xviii.   does the writing use affective/reflective language such as reflective comments and language designed to have an emotive effect on the reader?

xix.   are other descriptive devices used such as adjectives? (Knapp, 2005, 240-41).

At the final stage, we read them the story we had fabricated in the beginning and asked them to compare it with theirs. Then we provided them with the rest of the illustrated panels, that were missing. By comparing their narratives with ours, they found out that theirs were far more rich and vivid.

Then, we shifted our teaching course towards the development of visual literacy skills. We asked students to observe the functions of the images at both the macro and micro levels of organization (Astorga, 1999), by making several questions:

xx.   Do images illustrate every stage of the story?

xxi.   Do presentational images communicate all the events that are recounted in the written text?

xxii.   Given one stage of the story, which clauses have matching images? Which clauses do not have visual representation?

xxiii.   Are the circumstances under which the event takes place visible? (time, settings)

xxiv.   Are all meanings represented ?(E.g., appearance, identity of character, attributes of character, feelings)

xxv.   If there are gaps in the written text (e.g., events that are not recounted), are they filled by the visual text or vice-versa?

xxvi.   What logical sequence relations can be inferred from the visual images? (E.g., cause and effect condition.)

xxvii.   Are the relationships between the interactive participants in the pictures perceptible and how is this accomplished?

xxviii.   Does text and image give the same information, do they complement each other or do they convey different meanings?

CONCLUSIONS

By involving the students as active participants in the process of understanding how language and image simultaneously construct the world of the stories they read, we facilitated writing process (summary, dialogue, narration) and made it at the same time entertaining, while students became aware of the functional role of the images. Images can be associated with a view of language learning that regards language awareness as central to the process. It is a view of language learning concerned with the range of texts in which children are able to take a meaningful interest and it is grounded in Bruner's idea (1986) that children's linguistic development is dependent on their own perceptions of meaning.

For the micro-level aspects of a text, the learners' attention may be drawn to, for example, the words that signify certain analytical details, like the clothes of the persons or to the words that realize the "doing" part of the narrative clauses and they may be asked to examine the pictures with the purpose of determining which processes (actions, behaviors, thoughts) are -- or are not -- visually communicated. The same procedure may be used to bring the learners' attention to the words used to assign attributes to characters and setting in order for them to identify similarities and differences between the meanings conveyed by the narrative clauses and the visual images.

The proposal to deal with the three general semantic categories of process, participant and circumstance may appear demanding for young learners, but it should be recalled that Halliday (1985) observes that this framework is very simple and that it makes sense to very young children who are learning their mother tongue. Brewster (1991) states that visual aids that are available to encourage children to rehearse the language of the story, create a favourable learning environment conducive to intake. However, the activities that incorporate the visual dimension should be matched to the child's developmental level if motivation is to be sustained. The process of finding similarities and differences between the macro and micro aspects of the verbal and visual texts has a problem-solving component: the learners have to go through a process of analysis in order to determine what meanings they share or do not share. From a cognitive point of view, there is an implicit questioning process, with the learners moving from an analytical stage (locating patterns in language and linking them to the visual images) to a critical stage (identifying the purposes they have in the story). This kind of work that promotes active learning through experience, and the combination of inductive and deductive reasoning, brings the best results and encourages both lingual and visual literacy.

Moreover, by intermingling local history as a topic, we combined history and language teaching efficiently, in other words, we promoted writing through the curriculum. Our tale of course, could be modified, extended or even replaced by many others. We could also adjust to the story, various exercises of creative writing to expand the whole activity and embrace other goals as well. The concept was to make use of some historical epoch's surroundings in order to incorporate scenes and images from the city and its culture of the time, and at the same time to be able to insert some historical elements of a certain period, to help students acquire both language and history at the same time and get an integral idea of the cultural and historical environment, they are surrounded by. At the same time, by taking advantage of the comics' format we helped students visualize the narrative and set their imagination and creativity free, accomplishing teaching goals in a pleasant and meaningful way. In addition, we had the chance to sharpen students' visual perceptiveness and to teach them the fundamentals of the grammar of visual design.

APPENDIX: THE PATTERN STORY IS THE FOLLOWING:

In the medieval age, in 1480, when the island of Rhodes belonged to the Knights of the order of Saint John of Jerusalem, a bohemian but bold knight, named Armando, arrives by boat in Rhodes. He is dressed in tight trousers, boots, scarf and a cocked hat. As the ship enters the harbor, he faces the walls that surround the city, the big towers and the castle and he stares at them with admiration. He gets off and tires to find himself a place to sleep. He arrives in the knights' inn, outside Collacium, in the Burgum, where the servant brings him a platter with meat and grapes to eat and a vase with red wine. Then he notices a woman sitting at a corner, covered by a cloak, seeming uneasy. He approaches but she does not want to reveal her name. She is scared. He tells her he is a foreigner and that he would like to help her. Then she tells him her name, Miranda, and she explains that she was a local lord's -a cousin of magistrate-

daughter and she was trying to escape, because her father wanted to marry her with an old rich man. While she speaks, he is enchanted by her bright blue eyes and he falls in love with her. They run away together, but in the island there is no safe place to hide. She sends her father a note explaining why she had left. He then gets angry and makes an announcement that he would marry his daughter to the one that would bring her back. The two lovers are in a very bad position. Everyone wants to marry the lord's daughter because she is rich. So, they are surrounded by enemies. Miranda disguises herself like a man so that they can go to the market and buy some goods to eat. One day, while being in the open- air market, they notice that people are upset. Rumors go around that a threatening well- armed army of Turks comes to siege Rhodes. The magistrate mobilizes his army to defend the city. In the following months things are getting really bad. The food runs out and people get panicked. The sultan proposes a dual that would judge the result of the war. No one from the beleaguered dare face death in order to save his city. The magistrate says that he will award his niece as a wife, to whom fights for the city. Armando then offers himself. He fights to death and finally wins. Rhodes is saved. The lord's daughter appears and she gets married to her beloved Armando..and they lived happily ever after.

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