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Visual Discourse Analysis: An Introduction to the Analysis of School-generated Visual Texts

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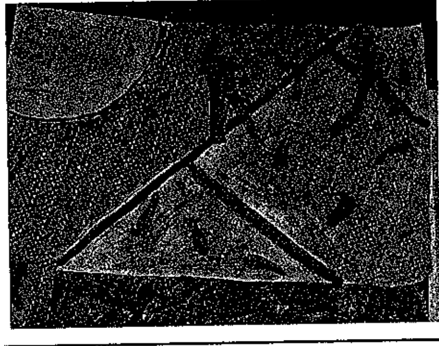
> Like French or Spanish, Art is a language that can be learned and understood. It is a form of communication that one can learn to read and speak through study and practice. Reading art means understanding a visual statement. Speaking art means creating a visual statement. When art seems strange or meaningless, it is only that this language is yet to be understood. (Goldonowicz,1985).

In one methods class in a large university, preservice teachers (PTs) watch a video about how Harlem Renaissance painter, Jacob Lawrence, and children's illustrator, Eric Carle, make their art. They also study Lawrence's and Carle's artworks in picture books and biographical books, and talk, in particular, about the context and composition. They then invent their own interpretation, locating their understanding of the Harlem Renaissance as personal, and design and create their own visual text in the style of Lawrence or Carle, or a combination of the techniques of both artists. Following this semiotic engagement, or an engagement that encourages meaning across communication systems (art, language, math, music, and drama), I invite these preservice teachers to engage in a discussion of what the Harlem Renaissance means to them in today's English classroom, and how this literary movement with high visibility for African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century emerged. Carolyn's text (Figure 1) positions the literature and experiences of this era as a vital part of who she is, walking along wide open sidewalks, with intentional blue footprints behind her, footprints that lead back to these influences. This visual text invites the questions, Who is she speaking to? and From where does Carolyn's visual interpretation arise? The two people in the visual text walk towards the upper right part of the canvas, and the viewer is compelled to look in this direction. This visual text maker vicariously invites viewers into this scene, and positions them to experience this sense of freedom that the visual text maker feels. In short, Carolyn wants us to know something about the Harlem Renaissance era, and value the contributions of the Harlem writers, painters, musicians, etc., yet she wants to tell us more. As viewers, we are positioned to read this text from a single perspective, an aesthetic response in which we tend to notice the qualities of the text that appeal to our visual sense. However, within this text are embedded other language structures through which the viewer can

Figure 1. PT's visual rendering of the Harlem Renaissance



respond. This text also presents the Harlem Renaissance as a highly political, ideal, and powerful movement through Carolyn's choice of elements within the text, the placement and arrangements of objects, the color choices, the directionality of the objects, the intensity of the medium, and so on. When viewers are able to recognize a range of structures through which to read visual texts, they learn how to more closely and critically understand messages sent from the visual text maker to the viewer. As Goldonowicz (1985) suggests in the opening statement, artworks, like written texts, can be read when viewers learn the language of art.

This paper explores the significant nature of reading visual texts created in English language arts (ELA) classes as information about the visual text maker, the information that she or he brings to a text, and how such information can tell the viewer or reader something more about the literacy practices of the text maker. Reading visual texts is framed in a process of analysis I call visual discourse analysis. Such a process has yet to be described and is in need of much more exploration especially now that visual texts, especially viewed on the Internet and technological advances in computer software programs, are dominating the written page (Kress, 2003). This discussion arises out of over 15 years of careful study of visual texts produced by students and teachers in classroom settings (Albers, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Albers & Cowan, 2006a, 2006b; Albers & Murphy, 2000). As literacy educators, we must begin to consider the language of art in much the same way as we do written language, as the stories and information that lie within color, perspective, composition, and so on are indeed powerful and telling (Albers & Murphy, 2000). Investigations into the making and analysis of visual texts produced by ELA students continually drive me to find and use a range of analytical tools that enable such readings. This work is born out of an interest in the artistic, linguistic, contextual and cultural location out of which visual texts, like Carolyn's, arise.

Visual Texts in ELA Classes

While visual texts in ELA classes are commonplace, they continue to be treated superficially or ignored (Hobbs & Frost, 2003), especially as a formal or informal means of assessing interpretation of texts or content knowledge. I use the term "visual texts" to describe texts that are created using visual media (paint, collage, drawing, clay, photographs, and so on). In ELA classes, the more commonly used term is "artworks," and yet this term gestures towards fine art and/or works produced from training in disciplinary processes and techniques associated with an art form (Efland, 1990) as well as a discussion that considers both the function and value of art (Berger, 2000). Further, artworks involve the effort of time, money, study, and imagination (Winterson, 1995), and children receive, if lucky, one hour per week of art instruction, and art teachers are often given less than three dollars per child for art supplies for the year. In short, artworks are visual texts, but not all visual texts are artworks. That is, a child's schematic drawing of an insect with its body parts labeled is a visual text, but may not be an artwork. Although young children negotiate the tensions between structural and cultural conventions in art and in language when representing imaginary worlds (Dyson, 1983; 1988) or to "understand, and cope with their world" (Hubbard, 1989, p. 144), as they grow older, visual language is made less significant, less valued, and its primary function is to develop written/oral language or interpretation of literary texts. As such, visual texts, for me, more aptly describes the texts that learners create in ELA classes.

Writing that focuses on close readings and analyses of student-generated visual texts is significant for two reasons. First, understanding literacy practices requires a thoughtful and systematic study of a variety of all representations created around literature and literacy, including visual (Harste et al, 2006). Analyses of relationships between and among objects within a visual text, along with a holistic reading of a visual text, provide information about the discourses that emerge in their texts, and lead to a more complete understanding of learners' literacy practices. Second, with the increase of visual information bombarding viewers daily, it is now necessary to have a set of tools for analyses of such texts. Further, as critical literacy has shown us, we must pay attention to what and how learners visually represent, as well as what they say and write. Visual representations, like written/oral language texts, must be viewed in light of the ideological messages conveyed, visible and/or hidden. Thus, the unique message-generating capacity of the visual arts media themselves no longer can be ignored. Too often nonprint-based data collected in ELA classrooms go unanalyzed due to educators' lack of techniques for analyzing visual texts (Albers, 2006b), and thus, viewers often default to a self-constructed aesthetic response in making sense of these data. Visual discourse analysis as a tool offers insight into responding to visual texts that moves beyond the aesthetics of the piece ("That's a [nice, creative, wonderful] piece."), and into a more critical reading of the text (Janks, 2000). Space allows for a limited discussion and presentation of Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA), but provides groundwork for future development and articulation.

VISUAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Located within semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988), discourse analysis (Gee, 2005), and the grammar of visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), VDA is a general term for an approach to analyzing art as a language and its use. It is concerned with a theory and method of studying the structures and conventions within visual texts, and identifying how certain social activities and social identities get played out in their production. More specifically, visual discourse analysts are concerned with and interested in analyzing visual texts, the marks on visual texts within the constructs of art as a language system, and the social, school, public, and community situations in which art as a language is used. We consider such things as what are good texts to study, what constitutes discourse analysis when viewing and interacting with visual texts, and the validity of discourse analysis. Such study invites a semiotic approach, or one in which there is an attempt to describe an overall structural organization of art as a language system (Saussure, 1916), and the social contexts in which meanings are produced (Hodge & Kress, 1988).

Semiotics is a theory that explores the nature and function of signs as well as the systems and processes underlying signification, expression, representation, and communication. In brief, it is a study of signs and sign systems, or language systems that have distinct grammars: art, music, language, math, movement, and dance. Semiotics offers a way of thinking about meaning in which written/oral language and visual texts work in concert, and in which written/oral language is not the primary source through which meaning is mediated and represented. Although artworks are different than written/oral texts, they not completely different, and the two have some parallels (Dillon, 1999). Like written texts, artworks are composed of parts, and the parts of bits of image,

marks, vectors, or direction of the action arranged on a canvas or surface. Such markings have been likened to words. Dawn Ades (cited in Dillon, p. 4) writes of Hannah Höch's piece "Cut with a Kitchen Knife through the Beer Belly of the current Weimar Republic": "disparate elements, photographs and scraps of text are thickly scattered over the surface, but still remain legible, like words on a page." Visual texts, like artworks, have arrangement and composition of parts and can be likened to the artful arrangement of words.

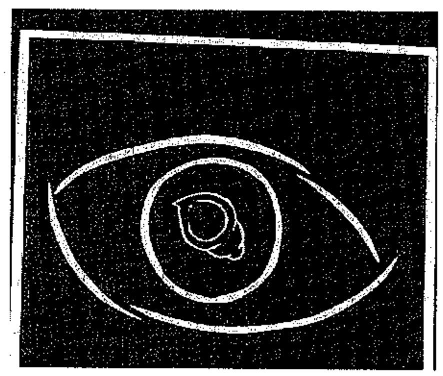
Hodge and Kress (1988) define a *text* as "a structure of messages or message traces which has a socially ascribed unity" (p. 6), and *discourse* "refers to the social process in which texts are embedded... text is the material object produced in discourse" (p. 6). A visual text, then, is a structure of messages within which are embedded social conventions and/or perceptions, and which also present the discourse communities to which visual text maker identifies. According to Halliday (1985), texts are in a dialectal relation with context; the text creates the context as much as the context creates the text. Meaning arises from the friction between the two.

In her focus on systems of writing, especially those associated with visual systems of recording, Hill Boone (1994) argues that pictures as texts are a form of writing that must be considered as significant in how they communicate as alphabetic writing. She outlines several categories of writing that have been identified by scholars, one of which Sampson and Gelb call "semasiographic systems," or graphic systems in which marks communicate directly and within the structure of their own system (p. 15). Archibald Hill (cited in Hill Boone) calls these "discourse systems" to indicate systems that have their own internal structures and conventions that give meaning (p. 15). They are supralinguistic because they function outside of language, and the pictures, or marks, are texts and can be read and understood (Hill Boone, 1994). Yet, far too often, both educators and researchers have suggested that those of us interested in VDA are "reading too much into the visual text," especially those created in schools. Their contention is that art is abstract and a consistent analysis is difficult if not impossible, and that written/oral language, because of its structural properties, is more concrete and, thereby, more analyzable. However, in his example of a young child's visual rendering of an elephant, Kress (2004) successfully argued that the visual text is far more concrete and the written word "elephant" is far more abstract. From such examples, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) developed a comprehensive analysis of structures within a range of visual media texts. Winterson (1995) suggests that a viewer who does not understand an artwork says more about the viewer's lack of interest in pursuing an understanding of art rather than the inability of the artist to communicate. Such lack of interest implies an arrogance on the part of the viewing audience "who have not done the work…who have given no thought to the medium or the method…and walk away…" (Winterson, 1995, p. 14). However, just as we read, study and analyze written texts, so too we want to do the same with visual texts (and other sign systems) to understand the messages sent by the signmaker to the viewer, and how the viewer is implicated in such messages.

Visual discourse analysis, like discourse analysis, addresses the discourses that emerge within visual text, the text itself, the macro and micro conversations surrounding the making and viewing of texts, and the visual text as a communicative event, especially within classrooms. Visual discourse

analysts study language use within visual texts not merely for the structural approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), but also for how language is used to communicate that acts as a force on viewers to encourage particular actions or beliefs. At the heart of VDA are four principles about language informed by Gee's (2005) work in discourse analysis. First, visual language is reflexive; it both has the capacity to create and reflect the context in which it was created, and reflects the reality in which it was created. Further, it acts on the viewer to the degree in which the viewer is familiar with the context of the text. That is, within classrooms, texts are created that communicate visual messages, and are often intertextually related to support or extend understanding of a written text. At the same time, these messages shape viewers' interpretations and responses, most often to the written text.

Figure 2. Elizabeth's visual text.



In Figure 2, Elizabeth creates a visual text based upon her reading of *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1959) in which she draws simple white curved lines for the eye, and simple yellow curved lines for the central image, the conch, and a black construction paper backdrop. She draws the conch in the center on a black background, signaling one of the novel's themes, blindness and sight. In Elizabeth's selection of these two elements, she positions the viewer to see the conch as a central message, and eliminates other choices for the viewer (Sonesson, 2005). Second, language allows for situated meanings to occur, images or texts that are "assembled on the spot" (Gee, 2005, p. 94) in a given context and based upon previous experiences. Meanings are negotiated between signmakers and their interaction with other texts and conversations. In schools, visual texts take on a history, a way of constructing and interpreting in which certain texts are created and socially acceptable. Signmakers create texts based upon teachers' directions, as well as earlier experiences with texts produced in schools. The negotiated meanings and intentions that underpin texts that children create in the early grades are similar to those created in older grades, the difference being that the texts of older learners represent more conventions and beliefs held by the larger social community (Albers & Cowan, 2006b). Elizabeth's two-dimensional text is representative of so many visual texts created in ELA classrooms (Albers, 2007): it is created without mess (unlike clay, paint, wood, wire, etc.), and clearly shows a connection to a literary text. In classrooms, students learn early on that visual texts are assessments; they must visually and clearly suggest intertextual connections to literary texts. Elizabeth's conch serves as a visual assessment of her understanding of Goldings' novel, and the conversations which emerge about this text are focused on the novel. Third, language is composed of many different social languages (Bahktin, 1981). How learners speak visually differs from how artists speak. Each social language

uses different tools or media through which to communicate or carry out their intended message. Because visual texts have been called "artworks" by a number of literacy and literature researchers, scholars, and educators, visual language has become "hybridized" (Gee, 2005, p. 105). It contains clues or cues that indicate some knowledge, whether schooled or self-taught, of art principles and elements as well as to language, to literature and to literacy. Elizabeth's visual text represents several social languages, those grounded in written and spoken around literary texts, those in art, those in being a student, those in being an immigrant, and so on. Within social languages, Elizabeth is able to pick and choose elements that help her say what she wants to say. She makes her own choices about medium (paper), the concept (symbolic use of the conch and the eye), the placement of the objects on a canvas (conch inside eye, eye in center of canvas), thematic choice, and so on. She is a social agent in this act of language use, largely because there are few strict and confining principles around visual language assigned to her. Further, the viewer can interpret this text flexibly, but often within the literary text being studied. Often, the only constriction that students must adhere to when making visual texts is that they be creative and neat, aesthetic constructs that viewers are most familiar with when examining and talking about visual texts. And last, there are units of analysis within visual texts, including structural, semantic, artistic, tactile, and visual. Educators' lack of understanding of these units often keeps visual texts raw, uncensored, and largely uninterpreted (Albers, 2006b, 2007).

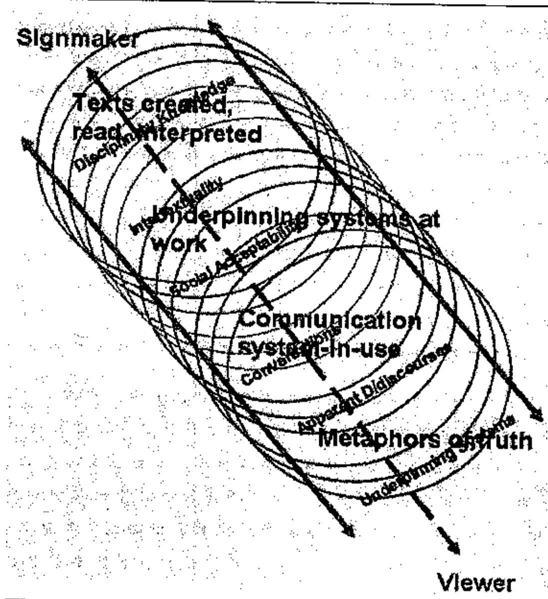
Inherently embedded in VDA is the concept of the critical perspective, or a perspective that identifies aspects of dominance, access, diversity, and redesign (Janks, 2000). In other words, visual texts can and do indicate the visual text maker's beliefs about who has and to what extent someone has power by what they include or do not include, how objects in the visual text are structured, what social meanings these objects have taken on, and what particular structures and materials are commonplace. Like critical discourse analysis, VDA attempts to establish the intersections of critical literacy, critical linguistics, and semiotics, to identify political and social injustices and how social communities condone such inequalities, and to theorize our own visual productions of meaning and analyses of visual texts we see in public and/or in schools (Rogers, 2004). Strong discourse analysis around visual texts suggests a small part of the full context of the text; however, this text must be examined within a larger whole, the context, situated meanings, discourses, intertextuality, and structural features. Within this section, I describe and define elements of and underpinning systems within VDA and informed by my analysis of hundreds of visual texts created in school settings. As in discourse and critical discourse analysis, multiple readings can and are possible.

ART AS A LANGUAGE SYSTEM

As I define it, visual discourse analysis, particularly informed by Gee's (2005) discourse analysis, attempts to understand Who is doing what?, Who is speaking to us, the viewer? In such analysis the viewer must begin to look at the visual text as information (Berger, 1977), but more than that, information that speaks to the discourses with which the visual text maker identifies. There are discourses or social constructs accepted by a larger social population (religions, political parties,

schooling), as well as the smaller communities in which we participate (family, clay, music). Also, attention is given to the discourses that shape the viewer. What does the speaker intend to say to the viewer? How is the viewer implicated in the visual message(s)? What does the speaker want the viewer to think or believe from the viewing of this text? To study visual texts and art as a language system, I identify six dimensions through which visual texts are structurally analyzed (Figure 3). These dimensions are multidirectional and move between and among each other. This is but *one* approach to analyzing visual texts, and as more study of visual texts is conducted, these dimensions will, no doubt, shift and change. Visual texts have: 1) *Underpinning systems* or systems that inform reading, creating, interpreting texts, with special attention to identifying and interpreting the cueing systems through which visual texts are read, interpreted, and created; 2) *Disciplinary knowledge* including unique features associated with art including spatial arrangement, repetition, rhythm of texts, quadrants of information, the social languages that emerge in the text, and how identity is shaped by these languages; 3) *Intertextuality* and the relationship of the visual text to art, music, language, and other systems of communication, and connections to literary or personal texts from which visual texts arise; 4) *Conversations* or discussions that emerge about what is art, what is the distinction between visual texts and artworks, do visual texts have value, what is the place of visual texts in schools, as well as discourses within art and visual text-making in schools that shape these debates; 5) *Social acceptability* or aspects of how people use different styles, techniques, materials, etc. for different purposes; how such use is accepted by cultural, social, and institutional forces; and 6) *Apparent discourses* or talk, styles, techniques, and beliefs that are accepted by various communities with which the signmaker identifies. As with reading written texts, the further away the viewer's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, and inquiry are away from the signmaker or visual text maker, the more challenging the reading of the text may be.

Figure 3. Model of Visual Discourse Analysis



Additionally, to study art as a language system, I suggest that one must consider four principles of language. First, visual texts are created, read, and interpreted all the time in public, school, and private settings. Viewers are bombarded with visual texts daily, and must attempt to negotiate the many meanings that visual text makers intend. Second, visual texts have underpinning systems of meaning at work, whether they be through the various cueing systems that comprise the text, or the discourses that emerge from the choices made by the visual text maker. Third, visual texts, like written, spoken, and signed texts, are created for a variety of uses and intentions. And, last, like written, spoken and signed texts, visual texts have metaphors of truth defined by particular social groups over time. For example, those who create visual advertisements generate visual metaphors that suggest to viewers a truth about what constitutes such concepts as beauty, femininity, masculinity, fitness, health, teaching, and so on. Concepts and information within such texts are organized schematically in similar ways, and serve to send metaphorical messages or truths about human thought and behavior that, over time, become stable and ready-made (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), accepted by a larger social community as part of a larger truth (Hodge & Kress, 1988), and at times, problematic (Ferguson, 1990; Simpson, 1993).

DIMENSIONS OF VISUAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Underpinning Systems Within Visual Texts

As a language system, art has five cueing systems by which elements and objects within a visual text are created and read: graphic, syntactic, semantic, tactile, and pragmatic.

Perhaps most recognizable and the system to which all viewers respond is the *graphic cueing system*. Graphic means anything that is visible to the eye: color, shapes, lines, perspective, etc. Within the graphic system, conventions around the meanings of color, line, and shapes are often stable and predictable. For example, color theory has taught both artists and readers that blue, green, turquoise, and silver are "calming colors," while yellow, red, orange, pink, and gold are "exciting colors" (Itten, 1973). Curved lines are associated with the organic and nature while straight and angular lines are associated with the inorganic or the world of technology and progress (Bang, 2000; Dondis, 1973). Over centuries of time, artists have drawn upon such conventions, scripted them into their visual texts, and readers—often untrained in these conventions—learn to read, interpret, and reproduce them unconsciously in their own work (Berger, 2000; Gombrich, 1994).

The *syntactic cueing system* refers to the grammatical or organizational structure of the composition and objects within it, the orientation of the canvas (top to bottom, left to right), and includes the front, the sides, and the back of the visual text. Within each visual text is a set of organizational structures that signify some aspect of the visual text maker's meaning. How images and objects within images are placed on a canvas is intentional and each mark, whether the visual text maker is conscious of it or not, has significance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Like in the graphic system, conventions exist within the syntactic system. For example, when stories or narratives are told through image, the orientation of the image or composition is predominantly left to right. If information is being presented, the orientation of the canvas is top to bottom.

Such conventions are reproduced over time, and artists and readers learn to read, understand, and produce them in their own work.

Perhaps the most familiar to readers, the *semantic cueing system* is the meaning that is produced both by the visual text maker and the meaning derived in its viewing, or what Scollon (1999) might call a social interaction, or face-to-face interaction, between the text maker and the viewer. Even as very young viewers, we transact (Rosenblatt, 1996) with visual texts like picture books, candy wrappers, environmental images, video, and so on. The meaning we glean depends upon our experiences with the objects within the visual text; the further away the experiences of a viewer from the visual text, the less meaning will be gleaned. One of the best examples is abstract art, a genre which often eludes a viewer because she or he is unfamiliar with it. However, the more closely the viewer can read the objects within a text as a system and as a whole, the more meaning she or he will glean. Thus, realistic paintings of John Constable are often preferred over abstract paintings by Jackson Pollack.

The *tactile cueing system* especially refers to three-dimensional sculptures and paintings, and the intention by the visual text maker is for the viewer not only to see the three-dimensional quality of the visual text, but to read and interpret the visual text through touch (clay, paint, papier maché, found art, fabric, photography [matte, shiny], and so on). Certain conventions exist within this system. Children often use cotton balls to present soft and fluffy clouds to help them and their viewers vicariously experience their imagined feel of clouds.

The last cueing system, *pragmatics*, is concerned with bridging the explanatory gap between the meaning of the composition to the viewer and the visual text maker's meaning. For example, immediately following 9/11, students across this country created visual texts that addressed issues of terrorism, support, help, denial, and shock. The materials they used and the compositions they created arose out of a particular context in order to come to terms with this event, or to expose the ills of terrorism. In English classes, learners often construct visual texts based upon their reading of a literary text or which accompanies an original story that they have created.

Disciplinary Knowledge

Visual discourse analysis also requires disciplinary knowledge of art as a sign system. When analyzing visual texts, knowledge of line, color theory, organization on the page, common symbols, design, and so on are important. Drawing from Kress and van Leeuwen's work (2006), all texts, including visual texts, are amenable to close readings and analysis. Although their grammar of visual design is more involved, I describe and explain several aspects of this dimension: basic areas of the canvas and orientation of the canvas, directionality of objects on the canvas, and size and volume of objects.

For the purposes of this paper, and often referred to as two-dimensional, visual texts created on the medium of paper have two orientations, horizontal (left-to-right) and vertical (top-to-bottom), and are divided into quadrants. As a general rule, each composition has an effective center of attention. Objects intended to be the effective center are not necessarily placed in the center, but this concept, center of attention, implies the importance of a particular object or

objects within the composition, and the visual text maker's intention for the viewer to notice this area of the text immediately. Objects, or elements, within an orientation and in a quadrant serve different functions and have different significance (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). As a general rule of analysis, in visual texts that have a vertical or top-to-bottom orientation, objects placed in the upper right and/or left quadrants take on an ideal or promised or ideal quality (Figure 4). For example, in advertisements, objects of beauty (women, men, children, watches, shoes) are placed in the upper quadrants. Objects placed in the lower left and/or right quadrants take on a real or given quality. In advertisements, the product image and details about the product are often placed in this area. In texts that have a horizontal or left-to-right orientation, objects placed in the upper and lower left hand quadrants take on qualities that are known or given (Figure 5). Objects in the upper and lower right hand quadrants take on new qualities or qualities imagined by the viewer.

Figure 4. Vertical orientation with ECA

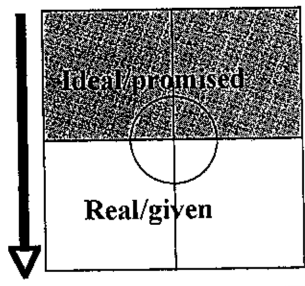
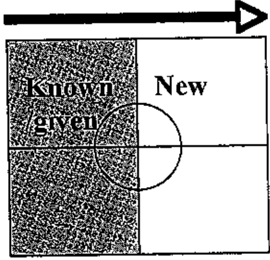


Figure 5. Horizontal orientation with ECA



Figures 6a and b illustrate the orientation of two visual texts produced in ELA classes. Mark's visual text, produced in response to Ernest Gaines's (1997) novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, was created in a highly engaged classroom in which students openly discussed their interpretations of the novel. Visual texts functioned as catalysts to continue the literary analysis, and art was valued but was not assessed nor was it analyzed in light of what it might suggest. This text has a horizontal orientation,

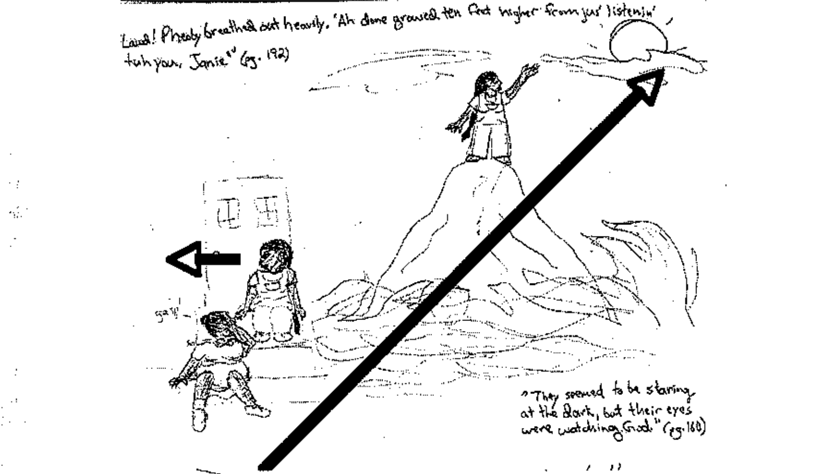
Figure 6a. Mark, high school junior, colored markers, *A Lesson Before Dying*;
Figure 6b. Tony, kindergarten student, age 5, colored markers, *Starry Night*

or a left-to-right reading, and suggests a narrative reading. Tony's visual text, *Starry Night*, has a vertical orientation, or a top to bottom reading. In this class, children studied famous artists, and reproduced their favorite. Tony's text contains information, or art elements (color, composition, line) that he liked from his reading of and interaction with van Gogh's painting of the same name.

Some objects or elements within visual texts have *vectors* that cue the viewer as to how she or he should read the story or information. This directional information, in conjunction with the quadrants of information, enable a viewer to see the relationship and the transaction between and among the objects (real or new, ideal or given). Figure 7, a visual text with strong vectors (shown by arrows), was produced by Genevieve in response to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1998), a novel in which Janie, the main character, through various choices and tragedies, finally finds a sense of self and freedom. This visual text retells three stages in Janie's life, her fear of what she might be (the bottom left), her lack of control (just above bottom left), and her found sense of freedom (upper right). Through vectors, Genevieve directs our eye to move from the bottom left to the upper right of the canvas, in essence telling us, the viewer, how Janie moves from her real and unattractive life to her ideal, and realized life, respectively. Genevieve continues this vector and moves it off the page through Janie's open arms and the sun's rays, and away from the other two parts of her life that she leaves behind. The other strong vector moves from right to left, and towards the given, or what Genevieve interprets as the given role of women and Janie's lack of control during this time period. So what is Genevieve doing? Who is she speaking to? Through vectors and placement of objects within particular quadrants, Genevieve tells us the progression of the story, and the significance that she places on Janie's found sense of freedom. Genevieve, a strong female herself with explicit career goals, lets us know her beliefs about the capabilities of women.

When reading objects in a composition, size and volume are significant features. The larger the object, the more significant it is, or the more space an object takes up on a canvas the more

Fig 7. Genevieve's use of vectors in visual text, graphite on paper



significant, and vice versa. Mark's visual text (Figure 6a) indicates clearly the significance of Jefferson's position as a convicted felon by his placement in the middle of the canvas and the size of the object in relation to the other objects. The thick black lines of the jail hold weight in terms of importance (Bang, 2000). With a large thick red arrow, a vector, moving from the center to the upper right, Mark takes us, the viewer, on a trip through the individual events that lead to Jefferson's walk to the electric chair. One set of objects, the three hogs at a table, take on more significance because they are repeated. That Grant, the teacher, in the upper central right part of the canvas, and the journal are smaller suggest Mark's lesser interest in these aspects of Jefferson's transformation. The large written text in the bottom of the visual text strongly anchors it in the novel.

Intertextuality

When perceived as a social language, visual texts are never created in isolation but in direct relation to others, or what is called intertextuality. Fairclough (1992) writes, "Intertextuality is basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, why they may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth" (p. 84). In essence, visual texts contain or are "snatches of other texts" that are apparent in the decisions made by the signmaker. These texts serve particular and common social activities in schools, responses to learning and literature, especially in ELA classes. They can offer cues to a teacher how and to what degree a student has understood a written text, their ability as a signmaker and/or artist, both pointing to distinct identities.

Tony's *Starry Night* (Figure 6b) echoes many of the same features of van Gogh's painting, from the color choices to the buildings on the horizon, to the bright stars in the sky to the dark colors below. Mark's visual text (Figure 6a) contains objects that represent events or people who are part of Gaines' novel, while Genevieve's text (Figure 7) shows a coming of age theme in Hurston's novel. Each of these visual texts is in an intertextual relation with other literary and artistic texts. Further, the marks on the canvases of these signmakers are those which have been assimilated based upon their integration of self-taught disciplinary knowledge. Mark's use of size and volume to represent key events, or Genevieve's use of a bottom left to upper right vector to express freedom are both examples of their incorporation of signs in one language system (art) to express signs in another (written text).

Conversations

As a social language, the visual marks or utterances within texts have meaning. That is, each and every mark does have significance to the overall meaning. That a child's erased mark from the canvas is intentional and as much a part of the overall intended meaning as its remaining visible marks. When learners create visual texts, they do so to communicate or have a conversation with viewers, often around literature. Thus, visual texts often prompt viewers to predict, confirm, or debate the issues or ideas within written texts (Albers, 2004). However, learners' conversations can, and sometimes do, emerge from the visual cues or the artmanship of the visual text, but are often limited to comments such as "Wow!", "[Louie] is really an artist!" "That's so good!" Rarely, if ever, do the conversations extend beyond an aesthetic connection (Albers, 2004) and into one in which elements of the visual texts are interpreted much less analyzed.

Social acceptability

The conversations that are generated from visual texts are confounded in that many of the visual texts created in ELA classes speak directly to the literary text, speak against it, or just narrate it. In such analysis the viewer must begin to look at the visual text as information, both in light of the materials used to communicate as well as the messages communicated. One must consider a range of questions. What are acceptable media in schools? What are not? What messages can and do learners communicate? How is their communication limited? What visual texts are socially acceptable in ELA classes? How does the discourse of visual texts in ELA classes inform learners' future texts, and how are viewers shaped by the discourses within these texts?

All of the student-generated texts within this article are rooted in the social language of schools and representation of learning. From the visual information they present, we can identify features that constitute socially accepted texts: 1) clear intertextual connections to canonical literary or artistic texts; 2) representational or realistic objects that identify events or aspects of a literary text; 3) self-taught knowledge of art resembles constructs that professional artists craft (structural features); and 4) media for school texts are often limited to pencil, paper, pencil color, or colored markers. Tony's representation of *Starry Night* emerged from teacher-directed instruction to replicate an artwork produced from one of several canonical artists. Such instruction gestures towards which texts have significance and which are left out in schools. Although multicultural literature has informed curricula, in terms of art, attention to master artists continues to have a strong foothold (Clark & Folgo, 2006; Collins & Sandell, 1984; Diamond, 1989; Dosser, 1990; Nochlin, 1974; Turner, 1990). Often in visual texts, learners integrate concrete or real objects found within a literary text. Mark's text clearly identifies several events within Gaines' novel, Elizabeth's text encases the conch in a symbolic eye, and Genevieve's text shows three stages in Janie's life. These images serve both as assessments and placeholds for aspects of a literary text deemed significant by the signmaker and which will also be recognizable by the viewer. Each of the visual texts also represents constructs that they have internalized by social conventions or ideologies. Janie's reach towards the heavens signifies her accomplished goal of coming to a sense of self as well as the Christian ideology of God's part in this process, and Mark's arrow reaches the ideal part of the canvas, heaven, where Jefferson will walk as a man. All texts are constructed from common school materials, are two-dimensional, and carry messages of how art, like written texts (books, magazines, comics, etc.), must be contained, neat, hangable, and storable. Three-dimensional visual texts, unless constructed from media secured outside schools, are not common. They take up space and lose significance once the literary text has been studied.

VISUAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: READING VISUAL TEXTS AS CONTEXTUAL, SITUATED LITERACY TEXTS

This writing encourages literacy researchers and educators to consider the role of analysis of visual texts as information that encourages a deeper discussion of what constitutes literacy. By doing analysis of visual texts, especially over time, we can more thoughtfully understand the discourses to which learners identify, and how, how often, and why they emerge over time. Visual discourse analysis, in this introductory presentation, significantly implicates the viewer as an active and critical

reader of visual texts, rather than as a passive viewer whose primary stance is aesthetic. The forms through which knowledge and understanding are constructed, remembered, and expressed must be wider than verbal or written language alone. What one can learn and be able to experience through a visual text cannot be known in a discursive form and vice versa (Eisner, 2002). Rather, meaning must be assessed through the lenses through which it is produced. If students, and educators, are to understand written, visual, musical, and dramatic texts (and so on) and be more able to express what they know through a range of media, they need to have the opportunity both to study structures, purposes, and qualities within their own visual texts, and to learn to read said texts. Although art offers a lovely respite from "regular work," like Eisner (2002), I believe there is more to the visual text than meets the eye. When visual discourse analysis is introduced and applied to the analysis of visual texts, richer discussions of learners' literacy practices can emerge.

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