

**Literacy in Art Education**

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ARED 4350S

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11/09/2022

**Instructional Equity in the Art Classroom Through Universal Design**

Literacy and art in education is a growing conversation surrounding concepts of interdisciplinary practices and multimodal literacy. Multimodal literacy is defined as the capacity and skills one develops to move from one sign-system to another. When one considers every form of media ‘text’, this concept becomes more accessible to students. Visual art is text that can be read and annotated as well as music, video, writing, and more. When one can develop skills in one area of literacy, such as visual language, it can make translating meaning and concepts across media easier. Educators consciously considering multimodal literacy in their instructional design and curriculum planning can add depth to lessons by influencing critical thinking about visual culture and furthering tools for meaning-making in the art classroom.

Teachers can reframe art lessons in many ways to actively incorporate multimodal literacy. This can mean planning a lesson with multiple forms of media to facilitate interdisciplinary work. For example, in the article *Story Bound, Map Around: Stories, Life, and Learning*, Ulyssa Martinez and Samantha Nolte-Yupari created a lesson on comic books to combine illustration and narrative writing (Martinez & Nolte-Yupari, 2015, p.p 14). Students can understand two conduits of meaning behind their work when they combine their visual art and writing to create one story. This also provides multiple modes of expression and engages student interest. By giving students many tools to create narratives, educators empower students and exemplify their innate creativity and value. This strategic design can even apply to college students. The educators in the article structured a bookmaking assignment surrounding maps (Martinez & Nolte-Yupari, 2015, p.p 15). This allowed students to use familiar symbols and memories to express and create in a form of media (visual art) that felt very unfamiliar. In this way, intentional multimodal literacy use by educators can help aid students to understand

interdisciplinary connections and their values when combined. Consciously considering media choices in curriculum design adds depth to lessons beyond production. This can lead to more critical thinking and awareness surrounding how and why we choose to express ourselves through different formats, skills necessary for long-term learning among students.

Introducing multimodal literacy into the classroom develops critical thinking and awareness about the visual culture surrounding students' lives. Visual culture can be defined in several ways, but it revolves around what we see and how it affects us in all realms of daily life. On the importance of this concept, Alexis L. Bowlan (2020) writes, “..visual culture is not merely an important feature of contemporary life; it is the most important culture we must navigate. We are forced to see more yet given fewer tools and less time to think about seeing” (Bowlan, xix). Understanding interdisciplinary concepts in media and culture can influence understanding of art in the classroom and vice versa. Students learn from visual culture and visual culture, in its grand scope, will likely be influenced by students. Art history in itself is a form of multimodal literacy and direct teaching of visual culture in a more traditional format. When students are taught the context, meaning, and writings on the piece or artist discussed, they can contextualize the history and work relative to their own art-making. Contemporary and new media examples such as those discussed in the webinar, *What's Your Story? Using Literacy and Art for Authentic Discovery* by Matthew Pembleton, can shape the way students become active participants in this culture. Pembleton discusses the empowerment, validation, and inclusion that students can feel when discussing music videos, musicals and contemporary art (Pembleton, 2022) . By analyzing this work with students and using it as the basis for a lesson, it puts interdisciplinary tools into students hands. Working with these tools can help students place their own work in the visual culture around them and validate their experiences and expression.

One of the main principles of art education is empowering student voice and expression with visual tools. By employing multimodal literacy principles through interdisciplinary lessons and materials, educators can further students' toolkits to create meaningful work and critically think about the media around them.

**References**

Boylan, Alexis L. (2020). *Visual Culture*. MIT Press

Martinez, Ulyssa & Nolte-Yupari, Samantha. (2015, November, 16). *Story Bound, Map Around: Stories, Life, and Learning*. Art Education

Pembleton, Matthew, (2022, November 2). *What's Your Story? Using Literacy and Art for Authentic Discovery* [Webinar]. NAEA

<https://virtual.arteducators.org/products/whats-your-story-using-literacy-and-art-for-authentic-discovery>