

Boys' Hidden Literacies

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR THE VISUAL

Jennifer Rowsell & Maureen Kendrick

This article explores adolescent males' hidden appreciation and understandings of images. Focusing on specific case studies, the authors offer visual methods to elucidate the social practices of visual literacies.

Dr. Seuss once said, “Words and pictures are yin and yang. Married, they produce a progeny more interesting than either parent.” Across many disciplines in the arts and in fields such as geography, where visual phenomena are a taken-for-granted way of knowing the world (Nairn, 2005; Rose, 1996; Scott, 1992), the visual is privileged. By contrast, in our own field of literacy education, language is privileged, and it is assumed that whatever can be thought or felt can best be expressed through language.

In this article, we consider three telling examples of boys' hidden talents and conceptual understandings of the visual to elicit how visual methodologies can be used in the literacy classroom. What is new about such an analysis is not so much the focus on gender or on multimodality but,



Authors (left to right)

Jennifer Rowsell is Canada Research Chair in multiliteracies at Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada; e-mail jrowsell@brocku.ca.

Maureen Kendrick is an associate professor at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada; e-mail maureen.kendrick@ubc.ca.

rather, the focus on tangible ways of framing visuals to foster and critically frame literacy work.

In a commentary in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Marjorie Siegel (2012) argues it is tempting to suggest that “the privileged status of language is being challenged by the ease with which youth can access semiotic resources of all varieties—visual, aural, gestural, and spatial—to assemble meanings” (p. 671). Yet, as she rightly points out, even though multimodality has become ubiquitous in academic and professional journals and is central to literate practice everywhere, the one exception is schools.

Our society has many terms for literacy (e.g., family literacy, health literacy, media literacy) and many new understandings of it in the 21st century (e.g., multiliteracies). However, in the eyes of many teachers, literacy still widely refers to reading and writing achievement (Blair & Sanford, 2004). As such, many practices that embed literacy (e.g., play, art, video games) are “invisible” because teachers do not define these activities as literacy. In all fairness, methods for incorporating the visual into language arts and English classes are relatively vague, even nebulous.

As a result, we have come together to examine the visual as a hidden literacy. What the

adolescent boys in our examples reveal are *hidden literacies*, or literacies that are least recognized by schooling (Pahl, 2003). Hidden literacies are often realized multimodally as drawings, performances, or gesture (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). In this article, we focus on the relationship between the visual and hidden literacies. Given concerns about boys' literacies in particular and how these are often glossed over in schools (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Kendrick & Rowsell, in press; Moss, 2008), we turn our attention to how boys use the visual to transform or relocate their school literacies to find personal meaning.

Boys and Hidden Literacies

There is extensive research on gender and literacy and divergent views about the issues. For the purposes of our article, we offer some of the theory and research, but with more of a focus on our experiences as researchers seeing patterns across our adolescent male participants.

Standardized tests over the past decade have shown an increase in underachievement by boys in reading and writing (e.g., National Assessment of Education Progress, 2011), and this trend is also supported by results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2009). It is important, as Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) have underscored, that researchers “engage with literature and analytic perspectives that are capable of addressing the complex interplay between various social, cultural, and institutional factors—such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality—that affect both boys’ and girls’ engagement with literacy” (p. 356). Such research and writing about gender illustrate how much we need to move beyond essentialist and simplistic explanations of boys’ underachievement.

A concern about school literacies and boys, specifically, is that literacy in school does not often

Hidden literacies are often realized multimodally as drawings, performances, or gesture. We focus on the relationship between the visual and hidden literacies.

resemble literacy in the everyday (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Smith and Wilhelm (2006) attribute part of the contrast between literacy in school and literacy outside school to a lack of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), as in blocks of time when learners can engage in gratifying and self-motivating tasks. Flow, as Csikszentmihalyi (1997) conceived it, allows individuals to complete tasks that are enjoyable and that have a set of characteristics: competence and control with manageable challenges and problems; clearly defined levels of difficulty; clear and immediate feedback; sensation of losing one’s self in the action; and, finally, a participatory, social element.

Without reifying or generalizing participants in our research, the adolescent boys with whom we work fall in with these descriptions; they invest time in keen interests and ruling passions that are certainly wide ranging, from video games to cooking to writing poetry and lyrics. Though it is certainly the case that girls are in front of screens as much as boys, questions remain about repertoires of practice within screen-based domains. Tapscott’s (2009) description of “Net Geners” is consistent with our experience with adolescent boys in our research:

Net Geners who have grown up digital have learned how to read images, like pictures, graphs, and icons. They may be more visual than their parents are (Sternberg & Preiss, 2005). A study of Net Gen college students showed that they learned much better from visual images than from text-based ones. (p. 106)

So many Net Geners, especially adolescent boys, would prefer to watch screens and televisions, interacting with digital media rather than reading a book, magazine, or newspaper (Brozo, 2010). Providing choice and flow time is one way to increase motivation for literacy, but a further push is to incorporate visual methodologies into text reading and composition.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) encourage educators to build on the affordances and tacit understandings of popular culture by adolescent boys to confront problems within literacy education. They advocate using popular culture as a bridge to more traditional academic texts. Indeed, such work demonstrates how much schooling neglects the myriad cultural forms that exist in the world in addition to traditional academic texts and

literature—films, dance, music, art, graphic texts, video games, smartphones, and so forth (Rowse, 2013). All these communicational channels signal something about culture and ideological perspectives. What's more, all these types of cultural forms are visual by their nature and substance.

In Kirkland's (2008) article "The Rose That Grew From Concrete," the author argues that youths like the young men he studied are certainly readers and writers, but their repertoires of practice and preferred texts and artifacts do not align with schooling models of proficiency in reading and writing. He uses hip-hop culture in his research to encourage a "New English Education," which is a study of English that accounts for the texts that today's youths value (Kirkland, 2008).

Other researchers have illustrated the ways in which hidden literacies are realized multimodally. For example, Blair and Sanford (2004) found that boys in particular frequently use morphing in their play with PlayStation, computer games, collector cards, BeyBlades, and Bionicles to describe the transformation of one form or character into another.

Several scholars, although not specifically focusing on boys, have highlighted the everyday practices and routines that can go unnoticed but that play such a pivotal role in their conceptions of self and their worlds. By examining adolescent artifactual worlds, Rowse's work (Pahl & Rowse, 2010) exposes the material nature of hidden literacies. Using the term *artifact* allowed her to interpret historical layering and agentive qualities embedded within material objects, as if these objects were found during an anthropological dig. By having students think about everyday objects that they value, use, and understand and that mediate their identities, Rowse reveals how valuable it is to acknowledge and critically frame things—objects that are often hidden from view.

In *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story*, cowritten with Kate Pahl, Rowse features longitudinal work in a ninth-grade classroom in New Jersey in which young people write artifact reflections about valued objects. In the book, Pahl and Rowse (2010) note that although "new" and digital literacies are clearly important, what remains underplayed are the everyday objects that occupy young people's attention and affections, such as bracelets, paper cranes, photographs, and the like.

Each of these "hidden literacy" researchers calls for the need to reframe our approach to understanding literacy by uncovering, unpacking, and identifying the hidden dimensions of literacy that are embedded in learners' meaning-making practices, rather than narrowly attending to what Street (2005) referred to as "correctness," "lack of ambiguity," and "the formal features of language" (p. 136). In the next section, we bring together methodological and conceptual frameworks in what we think is a productive way forward for examining hidden literacies in multimodal and visual texts.

Interpreting and Conceptualizing Hidden Literacies

Over the past decade, through our various research projects, we have become keenly aware of the complexity and multilayered nature of visual texts, including the ways in which literacies might be hidden or embedded. The richness and complexity of visual images, in combination with their range of forms, present inherent challenges for both researchers and teachers to make sense of these texts. Although substantial academic work on "things visual" is being published in the social sciences, "there are remarkably few guides to possible methods of interpretation and even fewer explanations of how to do those methods" (Rose, 2007, p. 2).

In Becker's (2007) insightful writing about ways of "telling about society," he argued that reports on society, visual or otherwise, "make most sense when you see them in organizational context... as organized activities shaped by the joint efforts of everyone involved" (p. 15). In other words, he contends that we need to see the visual as social and cultural artifacts, as the "frozen remains of collective action" (p. 15).

Siegel and Panofsky (2009) stressed that interpreting visual texts as artifacts of a particular place and space requires drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks, in other words, a hybrid approach—"a blend or 'mash-up' of theories" (p. 99). Similarly, Pahl and Rowse (2006) asserted that when accessing the underlying meanings of visual and other multimodal practices, "we need not only to account for the materiality of the texts, that is, the way they look, sound, and feel, but also have an understanding of who made the text, why, where, and when" (p. 2).

In this article, as a means of uncovering the hidden literacies of adolescent boys, we engage

in an analysis of visual texts that combines Rose's (2007) visual methodologies framework with an ecological/multimodal approach to language and literacy learning. Each of these frameworks involves broad conceptualizations of literacy that emphasize individuals' and groups' social, cultural, and historical experiences in relation to language use and meaning-making practices.

This interweaving and meshing of methodological and conceptual frameworks allows us to foreground context as our unit of study, which brings into view the hidden literacies in visual texts. Our analysis is driven by "rich points," or "moments of incomprehension and unmet expectations" (Agar, 1996, p. 4)—in other words, moments or "telling" examples in our data that make salient the tensions between schooled literacies and the everyday social worlds of adolescent boys.

Visual Methodologies

Rose (2007) emphasized that "images are made and used in all sorts of ways by different people for different reasons, and these makings and uses are crucial to the meanings an image carries" (p. 14). Moreover, because both images and audiences may be sites of "resistance and recalcitrance" (p. 15), a critical approach to visual images is required, one that takes seriously the agency of the image, the social practices/activities and effects around viewing, and the specific nature of viewing by various audiences.

According to Rose (2007), a critical methodology requires careful consideration of the intersections and relationships across three modalities (technological, compositional, and social) and three sites of meaning making (production, image, and audiencing/viewing). In terms of modalities, *technological* defines any apparatus designed to be looked at (e.g., oil paintings) or to enhance normal vision (e.g., the Internet). *Compositional* refers to formal strategies of composing, such as content, color, and spatial organization, among others. *Social* is the range of

Because both images and audiences may be sites of "resistance and recalcitrance," a critical approach to visual images is required.

institutions, practices, and relations (economic, social, and political) that provide context for an image and through which it is understood and used.

The three sites of meaning making progress from understanding the particular circumstances under which an image is produced (Site 1), to focusing on the image itself as a bounded unit (Site 2), to carefully considering how an image is looked at by various audiences in relation to the ways of seeing and the kinds of knowledge they bring to the viewing (Site 3). Although presented as distinct sites, Rose (2007) emphasized there is considerable overlap across the sites of production, image, and viewing, given that process and product are inextricably linked.

Many of the theoretical disagreements about visual analysis across disciplines relate to disputes over which sites of meaning making are most important and why (Rose, 2007). We find it most productive to place equal emphasis on each of the three sites, seeing them as inextricably connected and recursively relational to one another. Moreover, we take her core methodology as a constructive space for the integration of other visual methodologies (see, e.g., Kendrick & Jones, 2008; Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011).

In other words, Rose's (2007) framework allows for the creation of hybrid or mixed theories and methods that give access to the accretive layers of visual texts. Adopting multimodal *and* ecological approaches to language and literacy learning has helped us to access the social practices of composing and interpreting visual texts. To do so, we draw on ecological approaches with multimodal approaches. Taken as a metaphor, the ecology of language is premised on a view of multilingualism—or, as we adapt it, multimodality—as a *resource* (Hornberger, 2002).

An ecological approach to language learning emphasizes emergent language development; "learning and cognition as explained not only in terms of processes inside the head, but also in terms of interaction with the environment; and learners' perceptual and social activity as, in a fundamental way, their learning" (van Lier, 2000, cited in Hornberger, 2002, p. 35). An ecological approach allows us to look more closely at the performance of multimodal text construction and to consider students' experience across time and within a variety of contexts.

Similar to Villalva (2006), who draws on Fairclough (2001), we locate the “artifact” (text) at the center of our analysis and nest this text first within the influence of actions and interactions and then within systems and contexts in which the participants, interactions, and artifacts are situated. We view these levels of analysis (text, interaction, context) as reciprocally connected to Rose’s three sites of meaning making (production, image, viewing/audiencing).

Taking a multimodal perspective on visual texts gives us a heuristic to apply to our fieldwork. Clearly, to take visual perspectives on literacy practices connects our research to the field of multimodality. Multimodality serves both theoretical and methodological purposes for our research because it allows us to broaden our understanding of how participants make meaning. Certainly, multimodality has been on the rise for some time now (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 1997, 2003, 2010; Rowsell, 2013; Siegel, 2012; Unsworth, 2001; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010; Wohlwend, 2010), and it will only widen its reach as communication becomes more visual, mobile, interactive, and immersive.

So much of the notion of hidden literacies relies on multimodal theory such as Kress’s (1997) notions of *interest* and *motivated signs*. Hidden literacies exist because they represent and materialize interests. In our examples, hidden literacies are *motivated signs* because the texts that the boys value or produce reveal motivations and interests that are expressed through textual features. How do texts express the interests and motivations of a person?

For some of our participants, interest becomes manifest through a camera angle or the use of color. Interest and motivation can also emerge from the appreciation of techniques or the ethos of an image. As well, interest relies on a combination of words and images that can help us understand adolescent boys’ pathways into communication and meaning making.

In the section that follows, we draw on “rich points” from our various research projects to provide telling examples of the power of visual texts in classrooms. In each of these examples, we take as our unit of study the context of visual text production. Our combination of frameworks for visual analysis allows us to consider the unique narratives that emerge from images produced or valued by the boys featured in our research. Thinking about text production

and reception also helps us to raise important and unexamined questions about these students as meaning makers and the related educational possibilities.

It is our strong contention that visual texts have the potential to recruit students’ subjectivities, identities, experiences, and knowledge in important ways that allow for participation in social, economic, and political activities in their societies. What interests us as literacy researchers and educators is not only the nature and materiality of these visual artifacts but also the sites of production—most of them being homes and private spaces. The visual tends to be relegated to a private, almost hidden enterprise not often invoked in the classroom.

Telling Examples of Hidden Literacies

Example# 1: Andre

Introduction and Context. During the four-year Artifactual Literacies longitudinal study in a secondary school in New Jersey, Jennifer met Andre (pseudonym). To conduct the research, Jennifer worked with an English teacher on a series of multimodal projects with students like Andre. Although an active student in the class, Andre resisted writing but spoke at length about his many other interests. As part of an in-class activity during the school year, Jennifer and the English teacher asked students to choose a photograph or image and write a narrative to accompany what the image made them think of.

Though he was not keen on writing, Andre exhibited creativity and strong writing abilities (outside school—writing short stories), but he did not seem motivated by reading and writing. Given his variety of interests in fantasy, war, wrestling, and the list goes on, Andre was a renaissance man. What Jennifer noted is that Andre preferred assignments and activities that combined words with visuals, *and* he preferred real-world, authentic texts over literary texts.

To get a sense of Andre’s written compositions when he is in-flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997)—thinking about what he loves most, music—Jennifer provided another assignment. This brief excerpt from a writing assignment asked Andre to create a mental picture of his favorite place to hang out:

One of the most fascinating landmarks in Princeton, or even New Jersey for that matter, may be the Princeton Record Exchange. A great aspect of the place is being able to find very cheap, often rare albums by your favorite artists.... If one were to walk into the Princeton Record Exchange for the first time, he would marvel at the huge stacks of jewel cases on the shelves and the collection of used LPs to look through. With so many genres of music everywhere, it might be difficult to find a good place to start browsing, and one might spend a whole hour looking through everything. No matter how long it takes, you are sure to find something that you would like to take home and listen to. I have a few hundred CDs, and I bought most of them at the Princeton Record Exchange over the years. (04/22/10)

In Andre's writing, the reader experiences the space as Andre describes moving through it, picking up and reading CDs and LPs and seeing

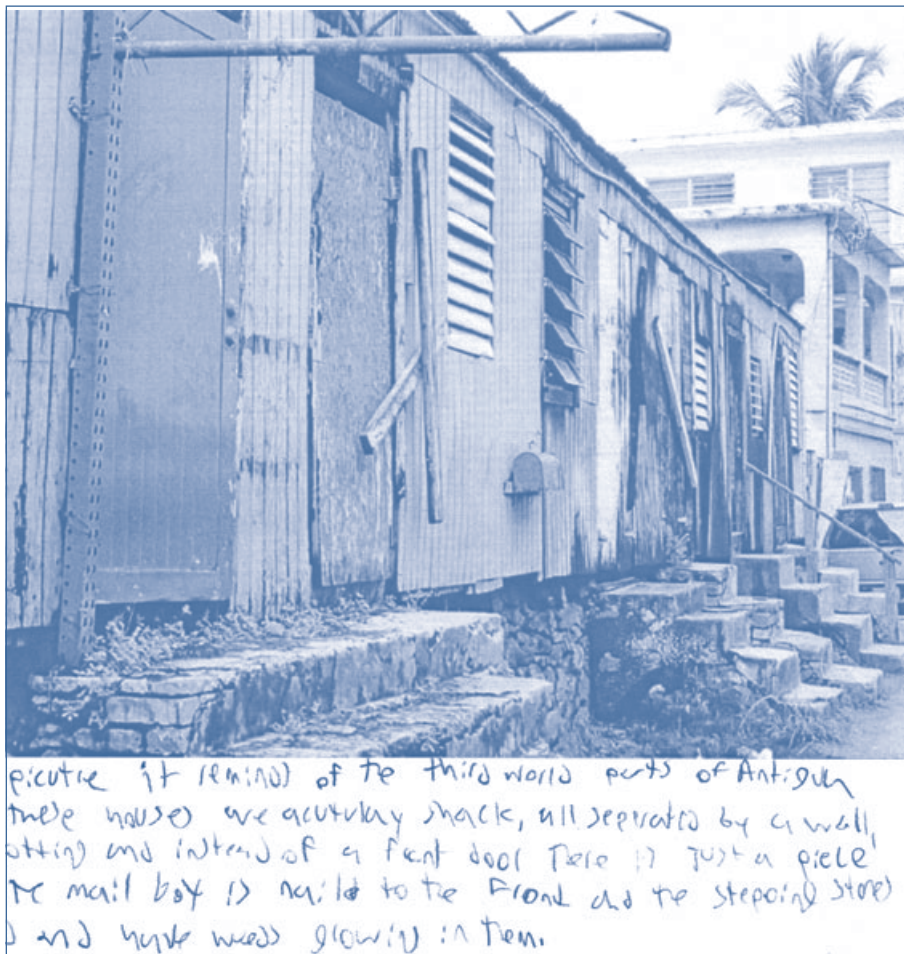
the space as filled with artifacts and practices. There is an antiquated, almost old-fashioned tinge to his writing voice that comes through strongly when he speaks more informally with adults and peers.

Site of Production and Image. For another activity in the Artifactual Literacies project, students were required to complete multiple readings of a visual (e.g., preferred readings [what viewers should see] and alternative readings [what readers actually see]). Andre chose the visual in Figure 1 as an image that makes him think. The site of production for the written text that describes the image was English class. Andre found the visual on a website of stock photos. The written narrative is indecipherable in Figure 1; however, it says the following: "This picture reminds me of the third world. These are actually shacks, separated by walls, and instead of a front door, there is a mailbox nailed to the door with weeds growing out of stepping stones." Although Andre did not spend much time on the written reflection and accompanying text, during our student conference he spoke at length about what the image analysis did for his thinking.

The assignment tied to this image was to write a narrative that depicts the mood of an image. Andre chose this image as depicting poverty, specifically poverty in developing countries. Juxtaposing the short narrative about the visual with his description of Princeton Record Exchange throws into relief how clear and invested Andre is when he writes about what he loves.

Site of Viewing and Key Points. Andre shared his image and reflection with Jennifer during a conference. He described why he chose the image

FIGURE 1 Andre's Image Analysis



and his ambivalence about the image. Andre was dismissive of his written narrative, but he insisted that it was the best image he could find and that it is an image that made him think. During Jennifer's discussion about the image, Andre admitted that he had imposed his own view of poverty and that people who lived in these "shacks" had constructed them based on their local conditions and their own needs and desires. Taken on an island in the West Indies, the image and the choices made to focus on elements of the image could be read in different ways.

Andre liked the idea of multiple, sometimes antithetical, readings of the same image. The key point of the image and accompanying narrative is that it serves as a contested image because, initially, Andre viewed the image as typifying poverty, but after talking more about it, he ended up viewing it through a more nuanced lens. The implication of this example for literacy teaching is that the visual opened the door for multiple readings.

Example # 2: Flimbar

Introduction and Context. In a different year of the Artifactual Literacies project, Jennifer met Flimbar (self-selected pseudonym). Flimbar was in grade 9 and in the support English class because he had difficulty organizing his work and keeping up with deadlines. Flimbar exhibits traits similar to the youths discussed in the "Boys and Hidden Literacies" section. He spends much of his time at home and outside of school drawing, reading graphic stories and comic books, and playing video games. Like Andre, Flimbar showed remarkable creativity and was known for his vivid illustrations. Whenever Jennifer visited the class, Flimbar could be seen drawing intently at the side of the classroom.

For the same assignment as Andre's image analysis, Flimbar shared an illustration he had created on the fly during a science class earlier that week. When Jennifer first met with Flimbar about his written narrative and illustration, he could not think of anything and claimed not to have an image. However, when he opened his notebook, the illustration fell out. Flimbar is incredibly visual and draws more than he writes, so in many ways this assignment was tailor-made for him.

Site of Production and Image. The illustration depicts a day in his life. Provided in Figure 2 is the text (typed as well) juxtaposed with the illustration. Flimbar drew the illustration when he finished his work during science class. The written narrative was produced after reflecting on the meaning of the image. There is interest and motivation behind the illustration that is tied to his natural drawing ability and the level of detail, from the menacing expression, the knobbed stick, the crouching stance, the battle cry—there is clear attention to details, an adept choice of the right kinds of adjectives and words to depict the scene. The site of the image is Flimbar's front yard, and the site of Jennifer's viewing of Flimbar's illustration is in his classroom at his high school.

Site of Viewing. The interesting thing is that Jennifer saw the illustration among miscellaneous pieces of paper, some crumpled, that were in his notebook as he cleaned his knapsack. Once prompted by Jennifer, Flimbar wrote a narrative about the illustration. The explicit nature and return to that particular Thursday and the events that unfolded in his written narrative would not have been as powerful if he did not have his illustration that captured the moment.

Key Points. Flimbar wrote his narrative *from* the visual depiction. Flimbar's other written texts for assignments and activities do not carry the precision and fluency of thought that this written assignment has. He makes spelling and grammatical errors, but his writing is fluent and detailed and captures the moment. In Jennifer's work with Flimbar, he had an extraordinary imagination that certainly translated into his visuals but not into his written narratives. Although he had the writing ability, he seemed to lack the drive and initiative to get assignments done. Given his marked interest and acumen with the visual, it felt as if Flimbar benefited from only a portion of English teaching and learning.

Example # 3: Carl

Introduction and Context. This case study features a research project that used Ewald's Literacy Through Photography approach (see Ewald & Lightfoot, 2002) to engage a class of grade 6/7 students in taking still photos and writing narratives in relation to four themes: self, school, community, and dreams. Here, both visual and linguistic modes were used as resources that allowed students to uniquely situate

FIGURE 2 Flimbar's Sunday Afternoon

(Flimbar)
 I can't remember which day it was but I think it was a Thursday. I went outside and the air was warm and the sun was shining. I walked out without shoes so I could feel the cool grass between my toes. I pick up my knobbed stick that resembles a club and climbed the tree in front of my house. I climbed about feeling like Tarzan. I then dropped my club to the ground and climbed on a branch like a sloth upside down. I did a half flip to land on all fours. I put some long sticks in the ground 20 feet away. I then gripped my mace tight, narrowed my eyes to the stick, charged. I charge singing a battle cry, as I close the space between me and my enemies. I swing and swing broken sticks flying as I fight through them in a fluid motion. As I have

Flimbar

I can't remember which day it was but I think it was a Thursday. I went outside and the air was warm and the sun was shining. I walked out without shoes so I could feel the cool grass between my toes. I pick up my knobbed stick that resembles a club and climbed the tree in front of my house. I climbed about feeling like Tarzan. I then dropped my club to the ground and climbed on a branch like a sloth upside-down. I did a half-flip to land on all fours. I put some long sticks in the ground 20 feet away. I then gripped my mace tight, narrowed my eyes to the stick, charged. I charge singing a battle cry, as I close the space between me and my enemies, I swing and swing broken sticks flying as I fight through them in a fluid motion.



themselves within the context of their school and community.

The students attended Garneau School on Vancouver's downtown Eastside. At the outset of the project, they received training in photographic methods and participated in a range of discussions during a school-based workshop with Maureen and a professional photographer/art educator, Mike

Emme. The students, many of whom had never held a camera, were then provided with disposable cameras and encouraged to produce a collection of 24 photographs.

Once the photographs were developed, the students wrote in a journal about their images (e.g., why they took the photo, what it means). Students had the opportunity to display their photographs

and narratives in a variety of combinations (as single images, images and text, image sequences, slideshow with audio) and contexts (in class, with caregivers and friends, with the larger community, including media personnel). These multiple readings allowed students to explore their own identities and the range of ways identity can be constructed through visual images and text.

Site of Production and Image. The students' multimodal text construction is located within the context of a Canadian documentary program that featured Garneau School as part of a series on inner-city education. The documentary portrayed the "dark side" of this community, directing the viewers' attention to images that related to "drugs, gangs, and prostitution," in conjunction with social issues labeled as "illiteracy, poverty, and family dysfunction." The school project was intended to provide an opportunity for students to "speak back" to the media by producing their own visual narratives about their school, their community, and, ultimately, themselves.

We use two of Carl's images as an illustrative example of how the visual allowed students to depict a range of identities across time and space. In the first image, Carl is sitting at his desk in his bedroom "on the weekend" (see Figure 3). He is dressed casually in a T-shirt and jeans, writing in a notebook. On the right corner of the desk is a stack of books; an English Oxford dictionary is set on top. On the left is a collection of small plants. As he wrote in his journal: "This picture shows how hard I work."

He juxtaposed this image with a second photograph of himself, similarly seated at a desk in his home but this time dressed in a shirt and tie in front of a computer (see Figure 4). As he described in his journal: "A business guy sitting on a computer all day long trying to be Bill Gates....I think this is what I will be when I grow up." Together, the two images show Carl's identity across time and space, from hard-working student to wealthy businessman.

Site of Audience. When we situate Carl's visual texts within the context of the media's portrayal of his school and community, we see a sharp contrast. Here, the visual reveals this student's hope as someone living in Vancouver's downtown Eastside, imagining a future identity that transcends those of drug dealer,

FIGURE 3 Carl Working Hard



FIGURE 4 Carl as a Businessman



gang member, and sex-trade worker so typically made available in the media. As Carl further explained in his journal,

I don't think it was very nice to say our school is poor and everything. We are kids and it discourages us to say that we are poor....It hurts us to hear that we are one of the poorest communities...it is filled with drug dealers,

prostitutes and homeless people. But our school has tried to make us feel safe...don't judge us by this community. We are just kids and we do not deserve to hear bad things about us at this age.

The images that Carl created are powerful and revelatory in the way they interpellate his own subjectivities, interests, and intentions.

Key Points. Both art and language provide a means to encode experience, whether real or imagined. Yet as Kress (2000) argued, the two modes are “embedded in distinct ways of conceptualizing, thinking, and communicating” (p. 195). Unlike language alone, the visual allowed Carl to speak back to the media by showing his unique conceptual understanding of his own life-world. It also allowed him to engage in a dialogue using the modality of the news media. He was able to reposition his own identity to make visible whom *he* imagines he is allowed to become in this society.

His compositional choices in the photographs constitute what Willis (1977) referred to as “the organization of self in relation to the future” (p. 172). The meanings reflect reality as imagined by the sign maker and influenced by his beliefs, values, and biases. Norton (2000) contended that students’ imagined identities and communities provide a key to understanding how and why they engage or do not engage with particular literacy practices (such as

those associated with a hard-working student, as in Carl’s case). We argue that these visual texts reflect these identities in important and compelling ways while simultaneously engaging students in authentic and meaningful literacy practices. To help teachers apply visual methods in literacy teaching, the Table offers Rose’s visual methodologies in relation to example data.

Including Visual Texts in Classroom Literacy Practices

Integrating Rose’s (2007) framework for visual analysis with an ecological/multimodal perspective to look across the three examples of adolescent boys as they navigate the visual challenged us to take more seriously the life of the image—its context, where and how it was designed and produced (see Table summary). From a pedagogical perspective, there is considerable potential for visual texts to contribute to students’ learning. The New London Group (1996) argued that for literacy pedagogy to be truly relevant to students’ lives, it needs to “recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning” (p. 18).

In our examples, clear pedagogical patterns emerge in how the visual serves to recruit students’ passions and preoccupations through its ability

TABLE Rose’s (2007) Critical Visual Methodologies

	Sites of meaning-making		
Modalities	Site 1: <i>Circumstances of image production</i>	Site 2: <i>Image as bounded unit</i>	Site 3: <i>Varying ways of seeing and knowledges brought to viewing</i>
1. <u>Technological</u> (visual to look at or enhance vision)	<i>Andre viewing image on a computer screen</i>	<i>Image depicts poverty by focusing on ramshackle house and rusted eaves.</i>	<i>Western, middle-class, Anglo-European perception of home, social conditions, “first world gaze”</i>
2. <u>Compositional</u> (strategies used to compose and design visual)	<i>Carl sitting at a desk at home in costume and using proportion, lighting, and posture for effect</i>	<i>Carl personifying a type and projected self</i>	<i>Success signaled by outer appearance, stance, everyday objects</i>
3. <u>Social</u> (institutions, practices, relations that contextualize visual)	<i>Flimbar engaging in play in his backyard at home and then drawing moment</i>	<i>Flimbar in warrior stance with movement created through stance, posture, illustration style</i>	<i>Awareness of action-adventures and what they involve and entail</i>

to (a) promote student agency and reveal hidden pathways to learning, (b) create opportunities for both construction and critique on society, and (c) evoke the dialogic (i.e., a stronger sense of audience and purpose).

First, an intriguing finding that arises from all three examples is how the visual promotes student agency by making visible hidden and purloined literacies. Using linguistic modes alone, we would not have acquired a window onto each boy's worlds without some orchestrating, nudging, even coercing. Their common interest and inspiration from the visual would have remained silent if teaching and learning did not transition from words into images. It certainly makes us wonder how many other students might have hidden visuals in their knapsacks, homes, and cubbies that would provide a valuable window into their dispositions for creativity and their overall pathways into learning.

Next, a subtheme is the visual as subversive and polemical. For Carl and Andre, visuals can be contested, layered, and at times inappropriate, yet these visuals still speak to their experiences, ruling passions, and interests. For Carl to make a statement about his neighborhood as a site of promise and dreams, he stages visual depictions of his dreams and how they, too, can be fulfilled in an area often viewed as marginal, even seedy. Andre needed to interrogate his visual to challenge his own stereotypes about poverty. Here, the visual allowed these boys to simultaneously construct and critique.

Related, one of the key factors in motivation and engagement in classroom language arts activities is student sense of audience and purpose. Inherent in the production of these visual texts is a dialogic (Bakhtin, 1986), a heightened sense of audience and intertextuality that is often absent in assignments that require students to express their ideas solely through language-dominant modes. Indeed, for many students, the perceived audience for classroom writing assignments is exclusively their teachers as part of assessment-based purposes.

In our examples, each student's image was part of a dialogic. Carl's image speaks back to the media about their misrepresentations of his home community. Similarly, Andre chose his image for its specific material qualities, such as grass and weeds growing through the steps, the rusty old mailbox, all

expressing poverty and what he regarded as "third-world" conditions. Flimbar's voice is very much informed by the visual, and he infused movement, adventure, and intrigue through character stance, facial expressions, and gaze.

As a final point, we speculate that it may not be a coincidence that all three of our examples feature boys. Across our various visual projects involving many students in elementary and secondary schools, our most salient examples of the power of visual texts place boys in the spotlight. It is also worth noting that classroom teachers had labeled two of the boys we feature in this article as "reluctant writers," yet each brought important ideas, knowledge, and purposes to the creation of images.

As Newkirk (2002) argued, this reluctance to engage in more traditional curricular writing may be a kind of resistance to particular language practices that are perceived as feminine and associated with "school" behavior, and that these threaten the status of some boys among their family and peers. Monomodal writing practices may also lack the action-oriented possibilities of the visual, in both production and form, that is integral to the meaning-making practices of many boys.

Implications for Classroom Teachers

Rose's (2007) visual methodologies framework, in conjunction with thinking about literacy practices from an ecological and multimodal perspective, provide concrete ways for teachers to document writing practices that incorporate the visual. Taking seriously the visual as a hidden literacy opens up pedagogical possibilities for all students. We also see it as a powerful way for many adolescent boys in particular to relocate their school literacies to find personal meaning and "flow" across their literacies, both in and out of school.

Visuals, especially those that are a part of everyday life, such as digital media, popular culture, and cultural artifacts, have the potential to transform literacy instruction, particularly in relation to writing. Teachers can ask students to compose, design, and produce written assignments that blend words with images and that tap into students' motivations, interests, and convictions while allowing them to critically engage with different types of messages and ways of speaking. Students can also be encouraged to

Take Action

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Use visuals in literacy teaching, especially visuals that are a part of everyday life, such as digital media, popular culture, and cultural artifacts.
- ✓ Find out about your students' hidden literacies by taking a regular literacy audit, which is a questionnaire about their interests, valued texts, and the like.
- ✓ Have students describe modes and visual effects in images.
- ✓ Use sticky notes and ask students to comment on and offer interpretations and oppositional readings of visuals.
- ✓ Ask students to compose, design, and produce visual assignments instead of written assignments.

use language to describe modes and visual effects in images.

References

- Agar, M. (1996). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography* (2nd ed.). New York: Academic.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays* (V. McGee, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Becker, H.S. (2007). *Telling about society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blair, H., & Sanford, K. (2004). Morphing literacy: Boys reshaping their school-based literacy practices. *Language Arts*, 81(6), 452–460.
- Brozo, W. (2010). *To be a boy, to be a reader: Engaging teen and preteen boys in active literacy* (2nd ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Duncan-Andrade, J., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: The promise of moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Ewald, W., & Lightfoot, A. (2002). *I wanna take me a picture: Teaching photography and writing to children*. Boston: Beacon.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson.
- Hornberger, N. (2002). Multilingual language policies and the continua of biliteracy: An ecological approach. *Language Policy*, 1(1), 27–51. doi:10.1023/A:1014548611951
- Jewitt, C. (Ed.). (2009). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Kendrick, M., & Jones, S. (2008). Girls' visual representations of literacy in a rural Ugandan community. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(2), 371–402.
- Kendrick, M., & Rowsell, J. (in press). The visual turn: Transitioning into visual approaches to literacy education. In S. Elliot-Johns & D. Jarvis (Eds.), *Perspectives on transitions in schooling and instructional practice*. Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Kirkland, D.E. (2008). "The rose that grew from concrete": Postmodern blackness and new English education. *English Journal*, 97(5), 69–75.
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the pathway into writing*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2000). *Early spelling: Between convention and creativity*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203164754
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic theory*. London: Routledge.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Moss, G. (2008). *Literacy and gender*. London: Routledge.
- Mutonyi, H., & Kendrick, M. (2011). Cartoon drawing as a means of accessing what students know about HIV/AIDS: A case study in Uganda. *Visual Communication Journal*, 10(2), 231–249. doi:10.1177/1470357211398447
- Nairn, K. (2005). The problems of utilising "direct experience" in geography education. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29(2), 293–309. doi:10.1080/03098260500130635
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2011). Washington: Institute of Educational Studies. Retrieved November 24, 2012, from nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1).
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, UK: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Pahl, K. (2003). Children's text making at home: Transforming meaning across modes. In C. Jewitt & G. Kress (Eds.), *Multimodal literacy* (pp. 139–154). New York: Peter Lang.
- Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2006). Introduction. In K. Pahl & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Travel notes from the new literacy studies: Instances of practice* (pp. 1–15). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2010). *Artifactual literacies: Every object tells a story*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- PISA. (2009). Retrieved November 24, 2012, from www.oecd.org/pisa
- Rose, G. (1996). Teaching visualised geographies: Towards a methodology for the interpretation of visual materials. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 20(3), 281–294. doi:10.1080/03098269608709373
- Rose, G. (2007). *Visual methodologies*. London: Sage.
- Rowsell, J. (2013). *Working with multimodality: Rethinking literacy in a digital age*. London: Routledge.

- Scott, J. (1992). Experience. In J. Butler & J.W. Scott (Eds.), *Feminists theorize the political* (pp. 22–40). New York: Routledge.
- Siegel, M. (2012). New times for multimodality?: Confronting the accountability culture. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(8), 671–681. doi:10.1002/JAAL.00082
- Siegel, M., & Panofsky, C.P. (2009). Designs for multimodality in literacy studies: Explorations in analysis. In K. Leander, D.W. Rowe, D. Dickinson, R. Jimenez, M. Hundley, & V. Risko (Eds.), *58th National Reading Conference Yearbook* (pp. 99–111). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.
- Smith, M., & Wilhelm, J.D. (2006). *Going with the flow: How to engage boys (and girls) in their literacy learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Street, B. (2005). The hidden dimensions of mathematical language and literacy. *Language and Education*, 19(2), 135–140. doi:10.1080/09500780508668669
- Tapscott, D. (2009). *The net generation takes the lead*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Unsworth, L. (2001). *Teaching multiliteracies across the curriculum*. London: Open University Press.
- Vasudevan, L., Schultz, K., & Bateman, J. (2010). Rethinking composing in a digital age: Authoring literate identities through multimodal storytelling. *Written Communication*, 27(4), 442–468.
- Villalva, K.E. (2006). Hidden literacies and inquiry approaches of bilingual high school writers. *Written Communication*, 23(1), 91–129. doi:10.1177/0741088305283929
- Watson, A., Kehler, M., & Martino, W. (2010). The problem of boys' literacy underachievement: Raising some questions. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(5), 356–361. doi:10.1598/JAAL.53.5.1
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wohlwend, K. (2010). A is for avatar: Young children in literacy 2.0 worlds and literacy 1.0 schools. *Language Arts*, 88(2), 144–152.

More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

Journal Articles

- Ives, D. (2011). Spotting foolbirds: Literacies hiding in plain sight in an urban English language arts classroom. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 43(3) 250–274.
- Street, B. (2005). The hidden dimensions of mathematical language and literacy. *Language and Education*, 19(2), 136–141.
- Villalva, K.E. (2006). Hidden literacies and inquiry approaches of bilingual high school writers. *Written Communication*, 23(1), 91–129.