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Crossing the Bridge: Integrating Visual Discovery Strategy and Young Adult Literature to Promote Dialogue and Understanding

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Abstract

Urban communities, separated by race and class, experience a disproportionate number of gun deaths, police shootings, crime, violent and nonviolent protests, as well as disparities in housing, education, and employment. These discussions are visual and textual, appearing in both traditional and social media outlets. How do adolescents read and make sense of these images? We discuss integrating a Social Studies practice, Visual Discovery Strategy, with Young Adult Literature to provide students with the skills to both critique images from the events in their lives and produce responses through both traditional and digital methods.

Introduction

Recent media coverage such as NBC News' (2017) accounting of the Michael Brown shooting and protests in Ferguson, Missouri, CNN's (2016) reporting of the Alton Sterling shooting in Baton Rouge, or the Dallas police shootings retold by *The Guardian* (Grierson, Swaine, & Laughland, 2016) demonstrate that our country is experiencing a number of events that cause us to reflect on how we talk with each other – and treat each other – in the context of race, culture, and socioeconomic status. Neighborhoods separated by race and class can be ground zero for discussions of gun deaths, police shootings, crime, violent and nonviolent protests, as well as the state of housing, education, and job availability. In communities where such events and discussions occur, intense media scrutiny presents itself in various ways through traditional and social media outlets. These reports and commentaries, constructed by first person accounts – through telephone recording devices, interviews with the media, interviews with police investigators, and body cameras – are then reconstructed repeatedly as professionals and amateurs edit and reshare via the press or social media including, but not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.

While adolescents may not be known for reading newspapers or watching news shows, at least 73 percent consume social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), which often includes a series of images and micro-commentaries on current events. While we recognize that the

immediacy and relevance of media can be an intrinsic motivator, we are not encouraging the sensationalization of tragic events. Rather, we advocate for a careful analysis of such events and related media. It is essential that teachers provide developmentally appropriate activities and instructional strategies that will enable students to observe, decipher, and comment on the complex issues that they encounter. Real life events are not separated into curriculum silos for easy consumption; however, when teachers attend to the essential attributes of middle level education (Developmentally Responsive, Challenging, Empowering, and Equitable) as outlined in *This We Believe in Action* (Association for Middle Level, 2012), they can plan more robust curricula with the above goals in mind.

We are three teacher educators who differ greatly in our political, economic, and sociological views. Despite these differences, we desire to model ongoing, civil discourse in our personal and professional lives. We also recognize how our teaching can be enhanced by attending to and informing adolescent media consumption and, in this paper, focus on the visual components of media. Thein and Godley (2017) affirm such everyday media usage and advocates for “embracing the places and spaces that constitute [students'] *habitus*” (p. 4). Morrell (2005) sees such text and image consumption, especially involving “print and new media texts,” as a way for students to employ their “everyday language and literacy practices....to work toward empowered identity

development and social transformation” (p. 313).

Furthermore, Brinegar (2015) reminds us that discussions of race, diversity, family/community connections and student voice are unevenly represented in the four primary peer-reviewed Middle Grades Publications (pp. 1, 4-5). Brinegar calls for researchers and teachers to be more inclusive in their research and in their practice:

Many middle grades educators rely on these publications to improve and hone their craft. As researchers we do these teachers and their students a disservice by depicting a homogenized middle school experience that may not reflect the reality of many teachers and their students. (p. 6)

The instructional approach we discuss below seeks to add more student voice as it rises from a more critical analysis of students’ consumption of social media. By including analytical strategies that help students explore their visual world, we seek to foster more open and positive discussions exploring how race, diversity, and community events have always been and will be part of our history.

In this paper, we discuss how traditional English Language Arts (ELA) instructional units centered on three adolescent novels – *Chains* (Anderson, 2008), *March: Book Three* (Lewis, Aydin, Powell, & Top Shelf Productions, 2016), and *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), which focus on different historical, human rights-related moments in American history – can be enhanced by a common Social Studies (SS) pedagogical practice, Visual Discovery Strategy (VDS). In addition, we focus on how VDS can be used to augment pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading discussions that help students visualize events in the novels. As students methodically analyze images, they are encouraged to think about how the authors create narratives that allow them to engage in meaningful, participatory literacy, or “be the book,” as suggested by Wilhelm (2016, p. 167).

A Rationale for Curriculum Integration

Units created in a cross curricular, interdisciplinary, or integrated manner foster and promote a pedagogy that supports the developmental needs of middle level students (Jackson, Davis, Abeel, Bordonaro, & Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 2000). A guiding voice in middle level curriculum, James A. Beane (1990) suggests a curricula that “help[s] young people integrate their experiences on their own terms rather than those of adults” (p. xiv). Beane (1990), along with other scholars (Lounsbury & National Middle School Association, 1992; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978; Nesin & Lounsbury, 1999), advocates for integration that builds on Dewey and champions democratic education.

Beane’s (1990) ideal is distinct from an integrative curriculum. Beane describes curriculum integration as instructional units where the lines between independent subject silos are blurred and student inquiry ranges freely across disciplines. In Beane’s ideal curriculum, the students’ voices guide the learning in full realization of a Deweyan education. Actively including students’ voices is a daunting task, but teachers can begin by building upon the resources and knowledge that students bring with them and, in this case, their consumption of visual media.

In the opening paragraph we contextualized several violent and racially-charged events. More recently, the August 12, 2017 events in Charlottesville, Virginia resulted in multiple injuries and the death of one protester as well as the death of two police officers in a helicopter crash. Additionally, on the eve of the initial submission of this article, we found St. Louis, Missouri embroiled in more protests and arrests. With these events featured in both traditional news sources and throughout social media, it is likely that they are consumed by students, especially as visual representations: photos, videos, and livestreams. We do not believe it is responsible to ignore current or past social issues while teaching towards standards. Nor is it responsible to discuss literature as if it is created in isolation without contextualizing how literature itself, and indeed all art, is often a response to historical and cultural events through an author’s ideological perspective.

Table 1

Directions for Visual Discovery Strategy (VDS), as described by Lobdell, Owens, & Bower, 2010, pp. 28-37.

Step One	Select powerful images (with layers of meaning) related to the young adolescent literature your students are reading.
Step Two	Project the selected image on a large screen using parliamentary seating, so students are facing each other (in order to facilitate discussion) with a wide aisle in the center leading to the image.
Step Three	Ask carefully sequenced and spiraling questions that lead to discovery. See Figures 2 and 3 for examples.
Step Four	Challenge students to read an informational text (a related passage from young adolescent literature reading), which augments the information garnered from an analysis of the image.
Step Five	Have students interact with the images to promote synthesis and demonstrate what they have learned from the visual and textual sources.

The Pedagogical Practices of Visual Discovery

Adolescents' cultural capital, curiosity, and intellectual power combined with the strategic utilization of images can "spark student imagination" and interest in a topic, an event, a theme, or genre, serving as a point of entry into a richer understanding of the humanities (Anthony & Hopper, 2016, p. 32; Card, 2011). Photographs, drawings, and other images can serve as powerful learning tools, in part because, as John Medina – the author of *Brain Rules* – has observed, the "visual process takes up about half of everything your brain does" (2008, p. 190). The five-step Visual Discovery Strategy (VDS) from Teacher's Curriculum Institute helps adolescents gather and interpret evidence, deconstruct images, and make hypotheses (for a detailed description of VDS, see Lobdell, Owens, & Bower, 2010, pp. 28-37, as well as Table 1).

The initial two steps of VDS strategy are preparatory. First, the teacher selects an image(s) that has a powerful visual impact. The most effective images offer rich stories or layers of meaning that can be unpacked through careful inspection and thoughtful analysis. Next, the teacher uses parliamentary seating – half the student desks facing the other half with an aisle in the middle leading to the image. This arrangement promotes discussion and allows students to access the image when needed.

As students enter the classroom, they see a large image on the screen and the classroom arranged in parliamentary style. In step three, the teacher guides students through higher levels of thinking about the image through a series of spiraling questions. These questions are scaffolded at discrete cognitive levels from gathering evidence, to interpreting the evidence, and finally making hypotheses (see example questions in Figures 1 and 2). This thorough and deliberate image analysis models the process that students can employ in their own lives when encountering the array of images that are part of our modern culture.

After analyzing the image, students read an informational text, which augments students' emerging understanding spawned by the image. The supplemental informational text might serve to provide additional details about the image topic, or it might shed light on an important, mysterious, or unusual image detail; the text might also offer a contrasting perspective.

In the final step, students are asked to synthesize the information garnered from both the image and the informational text through an Act-It-Out. Student groups are invited to step into the image and act out a dialogue, which incorporates their learnings from steps three and four. Teachers might consider instructing students to write a short script and/or they might give them



“Boston Massacre, March 3, 1770”
Chromolithograph by John H. Bufford, 1857

Visual Discovery: Step Three

Directions: Invite students to closely examine the image, then, ask carefully sequenced and spiraling questions. You are modeling and students are experiencing the image analysis process. Make sure student responses are at the appropriate cognitive level based on the prompts below. Redirect students as necessary.

Gathering Evidence:

1. What do you see in this image? Identify one key detail from this image.

Interpreting the Evidence:

2. Does the crowd have weapons?
3. How many people do you think were injured at this event?
4. What word would you use to characterize this scene?
5. In your opinion, which person in this scene is featured most prominently? Why?
(For each question, have students provide at least two pieces of evidence to support their interpretation.)

Making Hypotheses:

6. Why do you suppose soldiers fired into the crowd?
7. Why do you think members of the crowd were armed with clubs?
(For each question, have students provide at least two pieces of evidence to support their hypothesis.)

Figure 1: Introducing *Chains* using Visual Discovery Strategy (VDS).



“Two Minute Warning”

Photograph by James “Spider” Martin, March 7, 1965

Additional images of Selma’s “Bloody Sunday,” as photographed by Spider Martin, can be found at these links:

<http://www.spidermartin.com/image-gallery/>
and
http://www.cah.utexas.edu/db/dmr/dmr_result.php?search=bloody+sunday+martin

Visual Discovery: Step Three

Directions: Invite students to closely examine the image, then, ask carefully sequenced and spiraling questions. You are modeling and students are experiencing the image analysis process. Make sure student responses are at the appropriate cognitive level based on the prompts below. Redirect students as necessary.

Gathering Evidence:

1. What do you see in this image? Identify one key detail from this image.

Interpreting the Evidence:

2. In your opinion, which group appears to be the aggressors?
3. What do you think the lead trooper is saying to the group of African Americans??
4. What are the people in the background doing?
5. When did this event occur?
6. What word would you use to characterize this scene? (For each question, have students provide at least two pieces of evidence to support their interpretation.)

Making Hypotheses:

7. Why do you think the group of African Americans are standing with their hands in their pockets?
8. What do you suppose happens shortly after this photograph was taken? (For each question, have students provide at least two pieces of evidence to support their hypothesis.)

Figure 2: During-Reading Visual Discovery Strategy for *March*

role cards. Another option is to simply ask students to improvise a dialogue while standing in front of the image projected on the screen.

Because of its reliance on the introduction and interpretation of visual images, VDS can serve as an entryway into Wilhelm’s evocative dimension, which assists readers in “creating mental images and [envisioning] characters, settings, and situations” (2016, p. 87). Encouraging adolescents to slow down and consider an image used academically can help

them consider the time, context, and issues present in literature or an historical incident. This practice also helps adolescents gain skills to critically examine the images that confront their lives. In short, VDS is not just an isolated strategy to interest students or introduce informational text, but part of a bigger picture (pun intended) that commits to developing students’ long-term literary, historical, and media engagement. The incorporation of VDS encourages more integrated sets of cross-curricular activities and assessments.

The Novels

VDS highlights critical ideas in each of our selected novels, and we envision that a teacher might develop a long unit incorporating all three books or a series of three connected units spread throughout the year. To model this approach, we explain how VDS can be used as a pre-reading activity with *Chains*, a during-reading activity with *March*, and a post-reading activity with *All American Boys* – three young adult novels that explore race-related issues.

Visual Discovery as a Pre-Reading Activity for *Chains*

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Seeds of America* trilogy, including *Chains* (2008), *Forge* (2010), and *Ashes* (2016) can encourage integrated instruction in ELA and SS classrooms. This historical fiction series is extensively researched. The first book in the series, *Chains*, provides an understanding of the issue of slavery, featuring Isabel, a 13-year-old African-American slave during the Revolutionary War. Anderson begins each chapter with epigraphs using primary Revolutionary War sources as she weaves a riveting plot to historically relevant texts.

Few ELA or SS classes begin a historical novel or introduce an historical era with a discussion of how white or black Americans experienced the same period of time. Introducing an historical novel with VDS using an American Revolutionary period drawing (Figure 1) that incorporates images of race can help readers consider how race is not a new dynamic within American history, yet is not consistently discussed.

The image depicts the Boston Massacre, featuring Crispus Attucks as the central figure. This can generate an awareness that African Americans were participants in the struggle for independence. Frequently, the discussion of African Americans in U. S. history focuses on southern slavery, the Civil War, reconstruction, and ongoing civil rights issues throughout the country. By bringing race to the forefront of discussions as *Chains* is introduced, students interrogate how Isabel and Curzon's masters privilege their slaves' "work" over their deserved and promised freedom. Students vicariously experience the events of the Revolutionary War period in the novel, understanding that many

African Americans were active participants and not passive bystanders. As students think critically about historical issues, they can be encouraged to apply similar analytical skills to the images that represent modern events and challenges in their everyday lives.

Visual Discovery Strategy as a During-Reading Activity for *March*

Many classroom activities focus on the beginning and end of a novel. To start, we prepare students by generating questions, accessing prior knowledge, and framing the unit. To conclude, we prepare summative assessments, outline group projects, and suggest writing assignments. With the *March* trilogy, we advocate for more during-reading activities that allow students to pause and think about the issues as they progress throughout the narrative. This trilogy tells John Lewis' story as he witnesses and participates in key civil rights events in the 1960's. One of the defining moments is the march beginning on the bridge in Selma, Alabama (Figure 2). The renowned photographer, Spider Martin, captures the heart and soul of the march through intense black and white images. Clearly, the march has a beginning – planning, recruiting, and showing up. The aftermath of the march foreshadows other protests, speeches, voter registration efforts, and legislation. Martin, however, focuses our attention on the march itself. The images are purposeful and strong, and students examining these images must confront the emotions and sacrifice of the event.

As students use VDS to analyze the Spider Martin photo, they learn to slow down their image consumption of current events. In the *March* trilogy, it is *March: Book Three* that captures the nonviolent attempt to march across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama that was met with violence. The graphic novel won the 2016 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and the judges' citation includes: "The work is powerful, not only for its extraordinary storytelling and visuals, but for its chilling timeliness. *March: Book Three* reminds us how far we have come, and how far we still have to go" (National Book Award Winner, 2016, para. 4). Even the format of this text emphasizes the power of an image. Just as with *Chains*, students can critically evaluate images they encounter in their everyday lives.



Image 1



Image 2

Figure 3. Images courtesy of Sarah Krajewski, 2016

Visual Discovery Strategy as a Post-Reading Activity for *All American Boys*

There are recent examples of quality young adult books that address police brutality, including *How it Went Down* (Magoon, 2014), *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), and *Dear Martin* (Stone, 2017). However, Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's *All American Boys* is our choice for a novel that depicts America's uneasy relationship between black youth and the police. After completing *All American Boys*, a story about racial profiling and police brutality told with dual narration, students will likely be deciding which point of view most closely aligns with their worldview. Do they feel like they more closely experience the world from white, basketball-playing Quinn's perspective? Or will they align more closely with Rashad, mistaken for a thief and brutally beaten by a police officer? The image we suggest for a post-reading experience shows the two authors of *All American Boys* presenting together to a group of students (Image 1, Figure 3). As Reynolds and Kiely (2015) have stated, the genesis of the book, at one level, is provoked by the shooting of a young African American boy. At the next level, it is conceived when two authors decide to collaborate on a project that moves students to critical thought (Bates, 2015). In fact, one of the most important ideas associated with the book is that it is an act of collaboration (Image 2, Figure 3). Through collaboration, Reynolds and Kiely wrote a book that has resulted in not only awards, but in their opportunity to speak with more than 35,000 students and teachers since the book's publication (Brendan Kiely, personal communication, June 1, 2017).

The book is provocative, confronting stereotypical assumptions about the police, black urban kids, basketball players, white urban kids, and community responses to violent incidents. By having students analyze the images, they must consider that a protest, violent act, or impulsive social media post is not the only way to respond to a troubling event. VDS should be employed with these images as well, following similar patterns as noted in Figures 1 and 2.

Formative and Summative Assessments

When considering formative and summative assessments that help students think critically and examine social issues, two of us would heed Morrell's (2005) call to "deconstruct dominant texts carefully (i.e., canonical literature, media texts) while also instructing [students] in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice" (p. 313). One co-author would utilize assessments that call for students to analyze and critically evaluate images and texts so they are more knowledgeable and skilled democratic citizens able to critique various social issues and political positions and advocate for a more just society. We note this difference of perspective because the sharing of varying viewpoints here briefly exemplifies the frank, but constructive conversations that are needed in our schools and communities. In spite of these differences, we find that our acts of collaboration help us to be more balanced as we teach. Indeed, we at times find ourselves voicing a stance that might not be our own without sarcasm or irony, but in an attempt to be more inclusive. Overall, we encourage teachers to consider the power of

visual images, not only for frontloading and discussion purposes, but also for assessment purposes.

In *Critical Media Pedagogy: Teaching for Achievement in City Schools*, Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, and López (2013) cite the many ways students read media – emails, website content, electronic books and pop culture – and assert that adolescents can use media critically by engaging with social media, digital filmmaking, music production, and digital and traditional art. While the possibilities for assessments are endless, several brief suggestions come to mind. Photo essays – intentionally collected/created photos that are arranged to tell stories – may include brief, informative captions for each picture, and are sometimes accompanied by music. Such projects can help students consider how images in their own lives communicate truths about what they read. These stories can be modified to include Snapchat, Instagram, Tumblr, or even Graffiti.

Conclusion

As teacher educators, we realize that we are merely adding to the *en media res* conversation about critical teaching, literature, and new medias in the context of urban education. We worry about saying or doing the wrong thing, but still wish to add our voices. Tanner and Berchini (2017) affirm the value of keeping the lines of communication open through nonviolent, non-aggressive discourse as we “work to engage each other in discussions of race...” Thus, we desire further voices from scholars of color, practicing teachers, and social justice advocates that affirm and challenge our proposed practices. Our hope remains that all teachers can integrate their teaching in ways that help students become independent learners who can habitually examine, interpret, and discuss injustice and justice as represented in the texts they read, the historical events they study, and the daily events they both live and witness. True alignment to middle level philosophy echoes those concerns. As students explore a unit on racial issues in American history using young adult literature and Visual Discovery, they engage with curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant to their lives. Using quality texts that explore historical moments also breaks down subject silos and encourages students to look at current movements of racial unrest with the added benefit of historical perspective. We continue to believe that as

students use media studies and media pedagogy, they can better understand, respond to, and “transform the world” in purposeful and intentional ways, as Morrell (2005) directs (p. 319).

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