

■ *Renee Sandell*

Seeing a Bigger Picture: The

All educators are confronted with the question of “how to prepare youngsters so that they can survive and thrive in a world different from one ever known or even imagined before” (Gardner, 2006, p. 17). Part of the answer is that students must master new cognitive abilities to develop a cultivated mind that is disciplined; is able to synthesize; is creative, respectful, and ethical; and has the capacity to integrate ideas from different disciplines and an appreciation for those differences.

In contemporary culture, the preoccupation with televised acts of transformation (e.g., bodies, fashion, and spaces) and talent (e.g., in music, dance, and cooking) and the incessant demand for creativity and innovation combine to create the need for divergent and convergent thinking skills—thinking skills that shape meaning in school and society in the visual age (National Art Education Association [NAEA], n.d.). Today’s “screenagers” of all ages—living visually and virtually from handheld screens, smart phones, and computers—are continually engaged in creating, sharing, and responding to graphic images. From preschool to postgraduate level, all learners increasingly need multiple forms of literacy, especially visual literacy, which is to images what reading and writing are to words (Burmark, 2002).

Habits of Mind

In 2001 Jensen estimated that people receive more than 90% of their information visually, but contemporary culture has become even more dependent on the capacity for instant visual and universal communication (Metros, 2008). Increasingly students must be able to encode visual concepts through creating art and to decode meaning by responding to society’s images, ideas, and media (Sandell, 2003).

Art teachers traditionally have provided access to the meaning of art as a language and thus are instrumental in developing visual literacy—that is, “the ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st century media in ways that advance understanding, thinking, decision making, communication, and learning” (Texas A&M, n.d.). To develop visually literate citizens, teachers must engage all learners with art in its myriad forms, ideas, and purposes, using it as a qualitative language that, like poetry, explores how, not what, something is. Through the *informative process* of critical response, art learners perceive, interpret, and finally judge ideas that are connected to visual imagery and structures, past and present. Through the *transformative process* of creative expression, art learners generate artistic ideas that can be elaborated, refined, and finally shaped into meaningful visual images and structures.

Visual art skills and knowledge are increasingly important to education in all disciplines.

Balancing form, theme, and context visual communication and thinking

VISUAL ARTS



can help students develop enhanced skills, leading to multiple forms of literacy.

A graphic organizer helps teachers develop lessons that foster interdisciplinary connections and inspire deeper inquiry.

Figure 1

Form+Theme+Context: An Art Teacher's FTC Palette for Composing Meaningful Art Lessons



Studio Art Problem: _____

How does a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual aspects of art engage students with meaning?

FORMAL	+	THEMATIC	+	CONTEXTUAL
Actual Composition:		Broad Subject/BIG IDEA:		When:
Art Elements:		Subject Matter/Area of Focus:		Where:
Design Principles:		Point of View:		By/For whom:
2D & 3D Qualities:		Visual Sources:		Why:
Size/Scale:		Art Historical References:		Intention/Purpose(s):
Media/Materials:		Literary Sources:		Relevance/Significance:
Processes/Methods:		Other Arts Connections:		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Personal ■ Social ■ Cultural ■ Historical ■ Educational ■ Political ■ Spiritual ■ Other
Skills:		Other Subject Areas:		
Style:		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Math ■ Language Arts ■ Science ■ Social Studies ■ Physical Education 		
Other:				

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How will this learning experience help each student use a sense of design, story, sympathy, empathy, play, and meaning needed to develop a 21st century whole new mind?

Teachers of all subject areas must teach their students transformative and informative processes. Quality visual arts instruction gives students opportunities to be proactive learners through direct, firsthand experiences that involve transformative creative processes as well as informative critical thinking processes that apply to learning for life. Quality student engagement in visual art occurs through pedagogy within three interactive studio structures: demonstration and lectures, students at work, and critique (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007). Diverse aspects of studio thinking help learners:

- Develop craft
- Engage and persist
- Envision
- Express
- Observe
- Reflect
- Stretch and explore
- Understand the art world (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007).

Beyond their connection to making or responding to art, those habits of mind are essential to developing 21st century literacy skills that are needed by all citizens.

An Interdisciplinary and Sensory Language

Jacobs (2010) addressed the need to reexamine the traditional school disciplines in the 21st century and said that “central to becoming an educated person is the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility and the capacity to give form to ideas and emotions” (p. 55). The interdisciplinary nature of the visual arts correlates with the sciences and humanities—among other disciplines—to connect to life, past and present. According to Goldonowicz (1985),

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. (p. 17)

Although the instructional time and curricular emphasis of art instruction in schools has been reduced in many cases, this qualitative language has natural and vital connections with all school disciplines.

Despite how highly visual the world has become, for many, art is a sensory language that often remains a mystery—people do not know how to discern its meanings and “own” it purposefully in their lives. As Pink (2005) pointed out, “If a picture is worth a thousand words, a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures” (p. 50). Pink indicated that today’s learners will need to use the following six new senses in and out of school.

Design. A student with a sense of design “can create and appreciate human-made objects that go beyond function and may be perceived as beautiful, whimsical, extraordinary, unique and/or emotionally engaging” (NAEA, 2009). A teacher who cultivates a sense of design helps students find their place in the world and make visual choices, such as selecting and organizing spaces, objects, and materials.

Story. A student who is proficient in storytelling “communicates effectively with others by creating as well as appreciating a compelling narrative” (NAEA, 2009). A teacher who cultivates a sense of story among students helps them become aware of history and culture; understand text and subtext in the news and literature; develop the ability to explore conflict and resolution; and exchange ideas, enhance interaction, and improve persuasive and listening skills, leading to clearer connections with others.

Symphony. A student who understands symphony “synthesizes ideas, sees the big picture, crosses boundaries, and combines disparate pieces into a meaningful whole” (NAEA, n.d.). A teacher who cultivates a sense of symphony helps students see how pieces fit together to build deeper “understandings” and relate learning in and out of school, see themselves as evolving lifelong learners, discern the meaning of “friendship” in social media, and grasp relationships among conflicting ideologies.

Empathy. An empathetic student “understands another’s point of view, is able to forge

relationships and feels compassion for others” (NAEA, n.d.). A teacher who cultivates empathy helps students see the world as others see it; curtails diverse forms of bullying and harassment; builds tolerance; and fosters kindness, consideration, and caring.

Play. A student with a strong sense of play “creatively engages in problem-solving [and] benefits personally and socially from flexibility, humor, risk-taking, curiosity, inventive thinking and games” (NAEA, n.d.). A teacher who cultivates play helps make learning fun, collaborative, and experimental and helps students be less self-critical and not take themselves too seriously.

Meaning. A student who seeks meaning “pursues more significant endeavors, desires and enduring ideas, has a sense of purpose, inspiration, fulfillment, and responsibility in making informed choices towards [sic] higher-order thinking skills and transformation” (NAEA, n.d.). A teacher who cultivates a sense of meaning underscores the value of learning experiences; builds pride in contributions given and received; and fosters responsibility (versus cheating) and respect for teachers, parents, and others who are invested in helping all students develop into responsible global citizens.

Although those senses are experientially embedded in art learning, all of them can be nurtured and advanced in all subject areas while furthering a school’s cultural values.

Deeper Learner Engagement

To foster learner focus and deepen engagement while embracing contemporary standards for teaching art and other subjects, teachers must help students more fully understand art images, objects, and events, present and past, so that they can understand the relevance and significance of art in their lives. Using a balanced approach that attends equally to the form, theme, and context of an artwork can help learners create as well as discern layers of meaning in visual language, as revealed in the following equation: Art = Form + Theme + Context (Sandell, 2006).

The form of a piece of artwork, or how it “is,” can be explored by scrutinizing the artist’s many structural decisions. The theme, or

Quality visual arts instruction gives students opportunities to be proactive learners through transformation—direct, firsthand experiences that involve creative and critical thinking processes that apply to learning for life.



Figure 2

Form+Theme+Context (FTC) Palette for Disciplinary Learning

Discipline: _____ Lesson Topic: _____ Date: _____

Formal Qualities Structures	Thematic Qualities Big Idea & Relationships	Contextual Qualities Significance & Relevance

How does a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual qualities of the discipline engage students with meaning?

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what the work is about, can be discerned by exploring what the artist expressed through a selected overarching concept that addresses the big or enduring idea (Walker, 2001; Stewart & Walker, 2005) along with relationships that reveal the artist’s expressive viewpoint in connecting art to life. The context—or when, where, why, and by and for whom the art was created (and valued)—may be comprehended by probing the conditions for and under which the art was created and valued as well as by considering the work from perspectives in contemporary, foreign, or older cultures. Distinguishing how the form and theme work together within specific contexts fosters balanced, meaningful learning and removes the traditional instructional overemphasis on formal and structural visual qualities, which are insufficient to understanding contemporary social and other media.

The Form+Theme+Context (FTC) methodology provides a balanced, interdisciplinary, and meaningful approach to art that deepens learner engagement in encoding or decoding artwork. An Art Teacher’s FTC Palette

for Composing Meaningful Art Lessons is a graphic organizer that helps art teachers create lessons that prompt learners to uncover structural evidence through formal qualities, explore relationships that are embedded in thematic qualities, and discern various types of significance and relevance that are rooted in contextual qualities. (See figure 1.) Designed to activate divergent and convergent thinking by generating and “mixing” information, the art teacher’s palette helps art teachers create lessons to help students develop enhanced visual communication skills that lead to multiple forms of literacy.

By using the FTC methodology, art teachers can rebalance traditional art theory in which modernism emphasizes form, post-modernism emphasizes theme, and visual culture emphasizes context. Further, the FTC approach also correlates with contemporary education reform’s emphasis on rigor, relevance, and relationships. Those three Rs are pertinent to deepening the power of arts learning through FTC when students focus on the rigor of skill and structure (form), understanding and establishing meaningful relationships (theme), and appreciating significance and relevance (context).

A simplified version of the palette can be a creative tool for making balanced interdisciplinary connections in diverse settings and for developing critical thinking within any learning area or discipline. (See figure 2.) The FTC Palette for Disciplinary Learning invites teachers to break down and rebalance discipline-specific forms as skills and structures, discipline-specific themes and interdisciplinary relationships, and discipline-specific contexts that are significant and relevant to learners.

For example, Dana Kline, a teacher at Los Alamos Middle School in northern New Mexico, attended the Summer 2010 National Gallery of Art (NGA) Teacher Institute. Her intention was to learn how to use American art to teach U.S. history—particularly to students with special learning needs. Kline posted the following about her professional development experience on the NGA blog, along with her lesson and PowerPoint presentation:

Today I taught a lesson I created:
“American Art—American Identity”

to two classes of eighth graders, mixed special and regular education students. It's a beginning of the year lesson to develop our teaching focus of learning about history through a variety of perspectives. It was a very successful day of teaching! As an assessment strategy I gave the students one minute to write an "exit ticket:" what did I learn from this lesson? I got responses like, "art can reflect American culture," and "it really helps to learn about history by looking at art," among other comments that were simply gems of understanding....

Kline also wrote in an e-mail message as a follow-up to the institute:

I am taking the Form/Theme/Context idea one step further and using it to analyze American literature. In eighth grade, students read *Tom Sawyer* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (among others). FTC works really well to directly teach the critical thinking skills of inference, drawing conclusions and synthesizing. Once the kids have experienced FTC with American art, they can (and do!) transfer those critical thinking skills to literature. The process of direct instruction for teaching critical thinking skills is one that I have read so much about, and tried to do so many different ways—FTC works really well, especially juxtaposing American art with American literature. (personal communication, November 2, 2010)

Using FTC, this teacher engaged students with American art to better understand U.S. history and literature. The resulting meaningful connections reflect her students' expanding literacy and motivation for learning about cultures as well as disciplines.

Developing Vision

Seeing a bigger picture for teaching visual art involves recognizing the ways in which art informs other disciplines. Because of technology's prevailing role; continual expansion; and instantaneous, global impact, teaching students

visual literacy is the responsibility of all teachers and affects not only their training but also their curricula and instruction. Visually educating all citizens for meaningful engagement, deeper understanding, and stronger communal connections can be enhanced through the use of a balanced FTC approach that considers:

- Formal dimensions of learning processes that are influenced by technology and the increasingly visual world. All students need to know how to create using pencils, brushes, and scissors—as well as digital hardware (e.g., scanners and cameras) and software programs—to solve problems and communicate using an increasingly wide range of evolving digital interactive tools.
- Thematic dimensions of visual concepts that involve engaging all learners with diverse, big ideas about the past and present that are connected to meaningful interdisciplinary relationships. Students must learn how to respond to information overload as they "read" words, images, animation, and subtext.
- Contextual dimensions of knowing that speak to meaning in students' lives that are reflected in personal, social, cultural, historical, artistic, educational, political, and spiritual significance and relevance.

The FTC approach can be used to rebalance art with other subjects for deeper engagement and profound understanding. It can be seen as a pragmatic theory insofar as art is conceptualized in terms of its effects on its audience and the creation of specific shared experiences. In nurturing the latter, the heart of effective pedagogical practice, perhaps the FTC formula can provide the guidance that is needed to enhance every learner's ability to express and interpret visual ideas—achieving creative growth through inspirational experiences, deeper interdisciplinary learning in and out of the classroom, and improved communication that promotes cultural and historical understanding while becoming part of an evolving perceptive community—local to global. **PL**

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- FTC articles and palettes can be found on her FTC e-portfolio at <http://naea.digication.com/FTC/Home>