Navigating the New Semiotic Landscape: Why This Midcareer Teacher Uses Visual Art to Connect with Young Thinkers

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John entered my alternative language arts class as a fifteen-year-old sophomore refugee from an arts high school where adults had expected him to jog during gym time and do homework at night. He just wanted to play his guitar. It wasn't until his mother showed me a photo of a younger John that I learned that black was not his natural hair color.

This kid was gifted, but came into my class with a mild Aspergers diagnosis which manifested itself in a fiercely stubborn streak. He really wouldn't waste any energy on something he didn't want to do. He wanted to play his guitar. He wanted to compose on his laptop. He wanted to design. He wanted to find an adult in his life he could respect because, as I learned, most of them were working on disillusioning him.

I didn't have much of a chance with John. I know little to nothing about metal or guitar. I'm merely proficient on a laptop. I never took an art class. And I make plenty of human mistakes. Still, we nursed a productive relationship along for a year in which I found texts John was willing to read and projects he

was willing to think and talk about, not always to finish. (To be fair, I should point out that John was willing to write—though on topics he wanted to write about in his signature style.) Given his tightly circumscribed motivational landscape, I worked hard to construct a worthwhile learning environment for us both every day. In fact, regarding all forty of my alternative high school students in their three classes, I had to consider what I could possibly invent for tomorrow's lesson that would spark some interest. And in John's case, as genuinely intelligent as he was, did he really need to learn what I had to teach?

This frantic feeling of being at my wit's end on a daily basis—not just with John but with most of my alternative students—led me to apply for a sabbatical. These were bright, funny, sometimes messed-up kids who found little relevant about school as it had been done to them. I realized that if I continue to teach in any setting, I have to find some resolution for this quantum disconnect between who these students are and what school is.

I applied for my sabbatical to explore why it seems so incredibly difficult to find the one button I can push to turn each kid on to learning in a lasting way. Why after that year of sweat and emotional sacrifice, of alternative readings and music tech projects, of phone calls home and specific praise, of hallway conversations and extended journal comments, of listening with compassion to the drama of his band and his family, did John still choose to drop out of school?

The Disconnect in Theory

When I started teaching, I may have bumped into my students at concerts, or watched the same TV shows. Now, frankly, we inhabit different planes of reality. They Twitter; I handwrite Post-It notes and stick them on my husband's steering wheel. They have YouTube dates; I record *Lost* on my trusty VCR. They stream TMZ 24/7; I fall asleep watching the nine o'clock news. John taught me the basics of Garage Band, much of which I have already forgotten. Their techno-stuff just doesn't fall within my current domain of functional literacy.

Today's school-aged generation lives in "a kaleidoscope world of representation, where sound image and print are constantly refracted by each other" (Millard 3). They acquire literacy from the screen rather than the page (Bearne, "Interview" 290); they learn to think by "seeing" information rather than reading it (Heath 122; Freedman). They understand their American identities as those of consumers more often than those of citizens (Kress, "English" 22). These kids have been characterized as postmodern producers and self-referential composers, and famously as "digital natives" (Prensky 1).

Obviously, not all students grow up with the privileges of technology and media access, but this is the kind of environment that even our less advantaged students enter when they leave home, attend school with their peers, participate in the culture, and join the workforce. Yet, here they sit in 21st century language arts classrooms with teachers like me who typically privilege word text over visual, aural, kinesthetic or any other kind of text, in a formalist or new critical pedagogy that situates them intellectually in the early 20th century (Marshall 382). Their learning disposition and mine do not match anymore. In school, I was taught to conform to convention; their functional literacy is about innovation (Kress, "English").

The Disconnect in Practice

How 21st Century Kids Think

Nicholas Carr asked from the cover of this summer's *Atlantic Monthly*, "Is Google Making Us Stoopid?" Absent the value judgment inherent in Carr's headline, consider how constant exposure to visual media and access to a panorama of communication tools is changing the way kids think. If we evaluate their thinking with outdated criteria, they may seem distracted and disengaged, their thinking fleeting and superficial. Instead of viewing the new millennial generation's thinking as deficient according to 20th century criteria, we ought to be exploring kids' new and changing cognitive tools.

Questions for Evaluating 21st Century Thinking

- Whether linear or nonlinear, is there a logic for the student's sequencing of ideas?
- Are ideas grounded in or linked to their larger context?
- Is there evidence of recursive thinking?
- Is there evidence of metacognition?
- Has the student connected with a community of thinkers?
- Is there continuity of role, purpose, and product?

Theorists across the disciplines of psychology, pedagogy, and linguistics seem to agree that the linear design of our curriculum and practice, our scope and sequence paradigm, may create an uncomfortable discontinuity for our students who are more random and flexible in their thinking patterns. Our students "grew up on the 'twitch speed' of video games and MTV. They are used to the instantaneity of hypertext, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, beamed messages and instant messaging. They've been networked most or all of their lives. They have little patience for lectures, step-by-step logic, and 'tell-test instruction'." Borrowing some jargon from the software industry, traditional pedagogy and curriculum offers "legacy" learning and technology "future" learning (Prensky 4).

Consider video games as a pedagogical model of how to effectively interface with young thinkers. Kids aren't just playing the game; they're taking on roles, trying on new identities situated in new contexts. They are collaborating and using new tools necessary to solve problems within relevant contexts and assuming thinking patterns inherent in those roles. When kids try on these roles, they (like we did when we chose our majors in college) "adopt certain ways with words, actions, and interactions, as well as certain values, attitudes, and

Curriculum Design Guidelines Inspired by Video Game Design

- Is the learner immersed in the curricular world as a first person participant? Does she have an opportunity for a "God's eye" view?
- Is the curricular sequence compelling? Is it linear, multilinear, randomly accessible? Can it be manipulated? Do the learner's choices affect outcomes or have observable consequences for self and others?
- Is the goal of the curriculum clear and compelling? Are challenges exciting? Do they demarcate status and achievement?
- Does the curriculum offer imaginative spaces? exposition? peers who contribute information and collaborate with the learner?

beliefs" (Gee 8). It's not just a game; it's a way of being.

As I learned to do as a teaching major in the last century, I ask my students to narrow their focus, follow a process, and analyze information before rushing to the evaluation phase of thinking. John was more comfortable working independently in a conference room with his earbuds in and iPod on, surfing the Internet during breaks from his writing notebook, taking in details and seeing where they might lead him. Kids today prize speed and flexibility, are motivated by identity-driven tasks and the adoption of roles within these tasks. They are capable of simultaneously perceiving and processing multiple sensory stimuli. They eschew linear thinking, preferring to forge their own pathways, creating their own links as it were. On a bad day in the classroom, these preferences could look like apathy or insubordination, like John.

How 21st Century Kids Read

Those of us educated in the 20th century learned to read by first understanding the technology and materiality of books—the same skills practiced in Head Start classrooms across the country. A book has a cover with a title, and to read we begin at the front of the book and turn pages. Pages have tops and bottoms. When we read, we move our eyes from left to right and top to bottom. These lessons are so deeply ingrained in me that I can't tolerate reading the newspaper online. I don't want to click around to find the next story, a "related" story, or the "most read" story of the day; everyone knows the next story is supposed to appear next on the page.

I watched my six year-old son teach himself to read so that he could navigate the games on pbskids.org. The functional literacy of his generation takes place on a screen (Bearne & Kress 89). Instead of following a storyline or a linear progression of facts, today's kids create their own nonlinear reading pathways by clicking links. Linguists Kress and van Leuwenn contend in their groundbreaking *Reading Images* that "written text is meant to be read linearly, in fact, skipping ahead to see how it turns out seems like 'cheating'

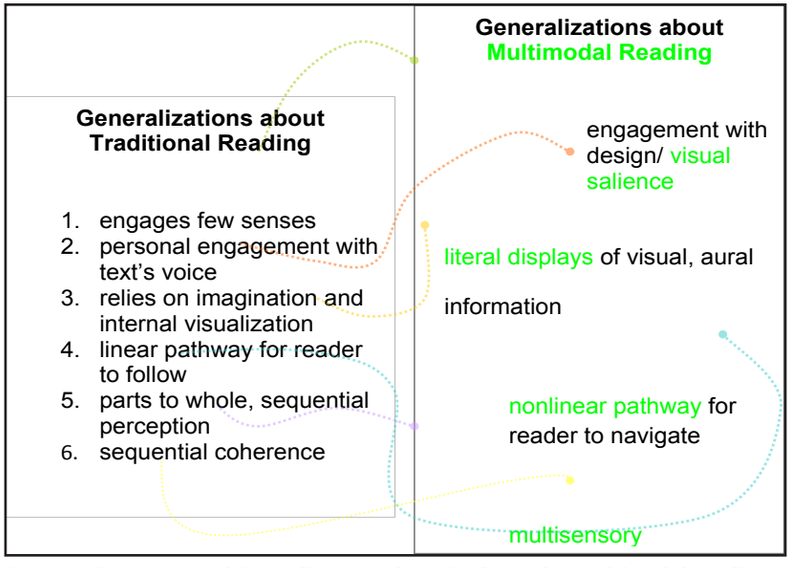


Figure 1: Comparison of Generalizations about Traditional vs Multimodal Reading

whereas nonlinear text, like images or multimodal text can be read selectively, partially or simultaneously, or according to image salience" (218). Readers in this context could also be called designers or even spectators (Kress, "Interpretation" 137; Callow 8). If we expect them to construct a linear understanding of a text, we should be aware that we could be asking them to struggle, wrestling information into an unfamiliar alignment.

My use of themes and essential questions to organize a list of fifty American literature titles didn't offer enough choice for John. He wanted to read about religion, but all of my texts were too word-heavy, too linear. "I don't read," he reminded me, meaning he would never pick up a novel and finish it. So I unearthed a volume of 200 years of American religious verse. He spent 10 days flipping across centuries and cultures finding remarkable paired texts and stunning juxtapositions among Henry David Thoreau, Carl Sandburg, Louise Bogan, and Rita Dove.

As my generation was trained to proceed through a text in a linear fashion, today's kids may attend to several text features at once (Walsh 30). The way they read is influenced by the text's medium and the nature of the text is determined by how they read

(Marshall 382). It's like Louise Rosenblatt's simple definition of literature as any text that is read in a literary way. If our students come to our classrooms fully competent in reading hypertext, and that is their primary mode, we shouldn't be surprised if their reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* seems scattered. The future may bring the disconcerting possibility that there will be no one way of "schooled" reading anymore. Reading already changes across modes and contexts: "'Reading' now has to be seen as a process in which full attention is paid to all the modes which are in play, to their functional load, to their respective arrangements, and to their disposition on the page" (Bearne and Kress 91).

How 21st Century Kids Compose

What many of my students call "sampling," most teachers would call plagiarism. But is sampling a less creative act? In reading about adolescents and aesthetics I came across the French arts practice of *bricolage*: "like bricolage, identity construction involves improvising, experimenting, and blending genres, patching together contrasting or even contradictory elements, creating and modifying meanings to suit the context and in response to the requirements, affordances, and meanings of the situation" (Beach and Swiss 44). Authoring new media texts with this kind of process offers a greater motivation to today's students because such composition is perceived as flexible and complex, occurring in stages that lend themselves to strategies—mode switching, hyperlinking, using tools within an application, revising aesthetically and recursively during drafting and composing (O'Brien). "Sampling" sounds more like intentional composition when I think of it this way. It isn't cheating. It's remixing; it's participating in a larger cultural dialogue by arranging others' voices in a meaningful way.

Given the tools we have at our classroom finger tips for composition—Garage Band, iMovie, Comic Life and older technologies like paint and canvas—it seems unreasonable that we limit our students' thinking to the possibilities of Microsoft Word. Different modes of composition afford different ways of thinking and knowing. "Schooled" literacy prioritizes

Traditional Composition Tasks	Possibilities for Multimodal Composition
multiparagraph literary analysis	soundtrack for literary passage podcast of character's internal monologue blog discussion hosted by student in author's voice Comic Life interpretation of aspect of text Flickr slideshow of motif or metaphor
persuasive essay	online role-playing debate satirical webpage design podcast episode on controversial issue Power Point, Apple Keynote presentation WebQuest design
journal writing	Voice Thread private or public blog posting
research writing	wiki pages, wiki books

Figure 2: Traditional Composition Tasks and their respective possibilities for multimodal composition

conventional writing as successful composition, but our students participate in a culture where anybody can be an author competing for an audience in an instant. Realistically, Facebook and its cousins are now a routine part of daily life. We should be helping young people learn composition strategies beyond shock and awe to garner attention and friends. Although we language arts teachers have tended to treat visual communication as somehow more primitive than written communication, visual text makes up the primary "real life" discourse of our students (Bearne & Kress in Walsh 26).

I think of John himself as a multimodal text, hair dyed black except for one natural blond forelock, can of caffeine always in hand—a prop—Garage Band and iTunes open on his laptop, ear buds in, notebook titled "Synaesthesia" at hand, long flowing lines of poetry and autobiographical narrative spilling down the pages interrupted occasionally by illustrations and designs. He's composing on multiple fronts, continuously. But which of his preferred modes of composition, if any, is likely to earn him a high school credit?

Using Visual Art to Connect with Kids in Theory and Practice

In the mid 1990's I thought I might like to become a counselor or social worker, so I registered for a course called Cross-cultural Counseling at the university to test the waters. I learned about the concept of creating a "third culture" in our relationships with students, validating who they are, but also sharing with them who I am so that we could negotiate safe and respectful ways to communicate effectively.

Obviously, I decided not to leave my classroom but did move further toward the margins in an alternative program, and the third culture model has helped me connect with kids. I wouldn't be comfortable diving into youth culture without a lifeline to my own more traditional past, and the content I feel passionate about. In other words, I don't mind teaching poetry by Tupac Shakur as long as I still get to teach Emily Dickinson. I'll tack up a poster of Marilyn Manson—next to the concept definitions of persona and voice. John can write stylized personal narrative as long as he demonstrates his conventional writing skills through revision. Artists and critics call this third culture idea the "Third Space," or the place where a viewer's life experience meets the artist's intended communication to make meaning.

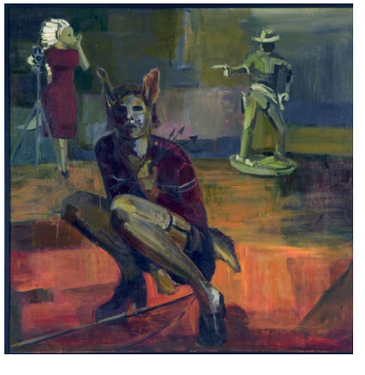
I've found that visual art offers a productive bridge between my students' image and technology-saturated experience and my conventional content knowledge. To be honest, I feel I'm offering worthwhile cultural capital in my hook for students' attention when I use slides of art works and museum field trips, more so than when I use music videos and websites. But a work of art also invites interpretation. We expect it to have "meaning" (and often become frustrated or judgmental when we fail to find it). From other media, we expect entertainment or information. Visual art works well as the subject of a discussion because "it deals with subjects that have fascinated whole cultures," it is "concrete" and "stationary," yet its "meanings are imprecise, ambiguous, open to interpretation, and often mysterious." Visual art objects "pull you with visual appeal but perplex you once engaged...and encountering them repeatedly does not always provide the same experience" (Yenawine 317)—all of which, interestingly, reminds me of the appeal of good video games.

New Century Learning Preferences Met by Visual Art

- Kids may be more comfortable with imagery than language as sensory input.
- They can instantly shift perspectives and take on the roles of elements or figures in the art.
- Visual art offers simultaneous information; it can be taken in "all at once" before it's analyzed.
- A work of art offers multiple, flexible meanings.
- By nature, much visual art is often unconventional or plays with convention in a meaningful way.
- "Reading" visual art in class is a recursive, dialogic process.

In the past four years of experimenting with visual art as text, I've written grants for art projects and documented student learning (Budenski). What I haven't done is find a way to fully understand how visual art affects thinking. Perhaps, more specifically, I haven't understood art enough to justify fully integrating it into my language arts curriculum. If I make time to read a Bosch painting, then I have less time to read *The Inferno*—fodder for English teacher guilt.

During my sabbatical, I decided to attempt to catalogue what kind of thinking happens in the Third Space. I audiotaped another teacher's students from an urban open middle school visiting the university's campus museum. On their field trip—the same field trip I'd guided my students on many times—these younger students both explored freely and traveled to specified works with a guide trained to facilitate discussion, on this occasion within the exhibit *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation Contemporary Native North American Art from the West, Northwest, and Pacific*. In the discussion that I recorded, students independently discovered a text pair between the poem "Just a Wannabe" by Dee Smith/Saki (reverse page) and Julie Buffalohead's self-portrait *Nanabozho and Coyote's War*



Just a Wannabe
by Dee Smith/Saki

Well, I'm just a wannabe
without a tribe ID
That's what they say about me
I dream the prophecies
and ceremonies
but I was raised white, so doubt me!
I may have had some blood way back when
But Grandma ran off with Whitey
And now she talks to me --
but I'm just a wannabe --
Life goes on without me!

Cos I ain't got no ID
No card in my wallet
Blood quantum insufficient
I ain't got no ID
Won't some plastic medicine man take a chance with me?
Maybe I can't talk or dance but I can chop some wood
And I'll pray real quiet, won't embarrass your neighborhood
cos I ain't got no ID
And nobody cares for me!

Well, I'm just a wannabe
But this is what I see
But I got no license to vision!
I wasn't raised this way
So they say I gotta stay
Back in the whiteman's mission!
The seed pod's gotta pop
the seeds have gotta drop
and grow wherever the wind sends 'em!
Or else there won't be
Any more trees...
Life goes on without 'em!

But I ain't got no ID
No card in my wallet
No family records
I ain't got no ID
Won't some plastic medicine man take a chance with me?
I can run some errands and show up on the lines
And stay out in the background when you come out looking fine
cos I ain't got no ID
And life goes on without me!

Figure 3: Poem by Dee Smith/Saki

Party. I transcribed student comments regarding the visual art, the poem, and the pairing intending to identify and categorize patterns in their thinking. Were they offering literal description, asking questions, making metaphors, shifting perspectives, speculating, gathering evidence? Really, were they thinking in the complicated ways I expected of them when they performed written textual analysis in class? Would their "reading" of visual art enhance their reading of word text? Would it use the same skills and strategies?

What I learned shouldn't have required such an in-depth investigation for a language arts teacher to discover: when you lay seemingly different things side by side and search for similarities, you make a metaphor.

Discussing the word text, students made literal observations to begin to work at meaning-making but didn't fully arrive at it:

> *She, um, she repeats herself at, um, every first paragraph cuz it says "well I'm just a wanna be cuz I ain't got no ID"...it kinda, it's repeating.*

> *When he said, "life goes on without 'em," when he said, "life goes on without 'em," he spelt me backwards and when he said "and life goes on with, without me, he spelt M-E and then when he said it the other time, he spelt E-M...so he spelt it backwards.*

Whereas, in discussing the art text, students more immediately imagined a metaphorical context to make meaning:

> *She's bein' half native and half white cause she have the arrows and wolf ears and the tail.*
> *It look like she modelling.*

> *She's changing into a wolf.*

She's lonely and sad.

Maybe she's um, she's like stuck or something like that. She's like she can't get away from something that's happening in her life or her spirit.

Interestingly, in the word text focused discussion, it wasn't until a student was able to identify the metonymy of "ID" that students cracked open the code of the poem:

I'm thinking that without a tribe ID that he or she is saying that he's not really labeled as anything in the tribe.

Metaphorical thinking is deeper thinking. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, contend that thinking in metaphors "permit[s] an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience. New metaphors are capable of producing new understandings..." (235). Literacy expert Kelly Gallagher interprets Lakoff and Johnson's work for the classroom teacher, pointing out that emphasizing metaphorical thinking allows students to "more readily reach deeper levels of comprehension" and "to generate their own metaphorical connections to the text... sharpening their higher-level thinking skills" (125).

While my observation and audiotaping doesn't represent a quantitative study with a significant pool of data, it is worthwhile to note that in the section of the discussion focused solely on the painting, roughly half of student comments could be categorized as metaphor-making. When they discussed the poem alone, just about one fifth of their comments could be called metaphor-making. Research suggests that images lend themselves more readily to metaphorical understanding: "In contrast to the verbal mode, in which even the most abstract concept can, in theory, be given a verbal label, the depiction of an abstract entity in the visual mode is utterly impossible without the mediation of

metaphors" (El Rafaie 92). That is, the vehicle of the metaphor has to be implied in its visual context and "read" as metaphor.

When discussing the poem in light of the painting, or the painting in light of the poem—the text pairing—all of the student comments that could be definitively categorized were metaphor-making.

Well maybe the dress is supposed to represent the white culture and the head dress the native culture.

Yeah, and the people are away from her, that's what they're saying. Doesn't have anyone around her.

He could be plastic because he's on like a little stand. The plastic things like men, you know, little army men.

It says in the poem, um, it says "What I see" I think... And she's holding the camera. Maybe the camera captures what she sees.

If we believe that metaphorical thinking is "deeper" than literal observation, then the pairing of image with word text not only bridges the students' preference for images and the teacher's need for words, but also facilitates deeper reading. In the discussion of the pair of texts, each explained the other. Students could "hyperlink" between features of the painting and lines in the poem. The voice in the poem became a monologue for the figure in the painting, and her metaphorical context helped students to interpret the poem.

Beyond considering the construction of metaphors in the discussion, I also noted that, in talking about the visual art, students were more likely to access prior knowledge to explain what they saw. One student recalled a "Simpsons" episode about spirituality and another the classic battles of Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote. Several recalled bits of knowledge they'd learned about pow wows or ceremonies, and about Native Americans

in general. While prior knowledge surfaced during discussion of the poem alone, references seemed more far reaching during discussion of the visual art. In fact, students read the art with a freely speculative attitude whereas reading the poem seemed to require more evidence-gathering and deliberation. Technical aspects of the painting, like background color and point of view, became visually salient and open to speculation; that didn't happen for the poem beyond simple observations of repetition. Ultimately, there seemed to be a distinction between reading purposes—figuring out what's happening versus what it means.

Conclusions and Implications

The first university course of my sabbatical was *Digital Writing*. Within two weeks of vlogging and RPGs, I began to feel as if I should retire from teaching. I can't possibly keep up with my students' rapidly changing semiotic landscape. They're writing, reading, and otherwise composing in modes that are utterly foreign to me and that could be obsolete by the time I figure them out. I worried that students would be better served by a younger, digitally native teacher.

Yet given my own success using visual art and the discussion I observed at the museum, I realize that multimodal isn't necessarily synonymous with technological. Rather than wallow in my fear of obsolescence, I should find places to include visual and aural text across my curriculum, bringing in visual art, music videos, relevant pop culture magazines. Even low ability readers can competently read images (Styles 280), and I've learned what the pairing of images and words can do to deepen student thinking. However, the way the image is treated is as important as injecting it into the lesson. If image or sound texts are treated as simple illustrations of word-based text in the curriculum, students will likely disregard them as redundant

Critical Response Protocol for Reading Visual Art

1. What do you notice (in the painting/ photograph/ sculpture, etc.)?
2. What does it remind you of?
3. How does it make you feel?
4. What questions surface?
5. Speculate. Answer your own questions.

information. (Think about how quickly your attention wanders when someone gives a PowerPoint presentation by simply reading his slides.) Treating these texts as worthy of thinking and interpretation (reading them in literary and critical ways) reinforces traditionally important literacy skills like making predictions, activating schema, seeking and organizing patterns, and questioning. Researchers have shown that these skills transfer across modes and media (Housen 99-100; Styles 280) and further conclude that "...reading engagement initially learned with intrinsically motivating activities in one knowledge domain transferred flexibly to a new knowledge domain" (Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, & Rinehart, cited in Styles 280).

My *Digital Writing* experience and other research this year also helped me come to terms with the fact that, while I may never become tech savvy enough to keep up with my students, I do have to work harder to understand their familiar modes of discourse. I can't assign a five paragraph essay and expect that accepting each paragraph as a blog posting makes it an edgy new media project. Each new composition platform, whether it's a blog, wiki, a webpage, a photograph, a mash-up, a painting, or whatever, is a genre of its own with conventions and user expectations. We can't shoehorn what we've always done into the screen and expect students to make sense of it, the "old wine in new bottles syndrome" (Lankshear and Bigum cited in Millard 4). If a multiparagraph essay is to become an on-screen project, it's going to become a hypertext document, a PowerPoint presentation, a wiki, or a webpage. I need to be willing to get comfortable in their domain.

As a habit, I've taught my subject areas as content or packages of skills. Consider how we could teach our disciplines as a way of knowing and being. My students come to class thinking like gamers, thinking like rockers, thinking like consumers; my job is to help them to practice thinking like readers, writers, makers of meaning. Visual art has proved to be the mediator in my classroom to resolve this disconnect, allowing for the sort of recursive, flexible, unconventional and visual thinking my students prefer while allowing me to offer or to scaffold to what

I consider to be worthwhile content and skills. Limited as my research was to one group of students from one other school, I feel encouraged by the successful thinking I saw replicated between my classroom and the museum setting.

Yet at the end of my sabbatical, I still don't know which button I could have pushed to keep John in school. Maybe if I had another year with him, I could find the one that would work. Or maybe dropping out was an inevitable ending for John's formal education. In the Third Space paradigm, I have something to offer and John has something to give, a transaction that results in meaning-making. The first ten years of John's schooling reinforced a disconnect between what any teacher might have to offer and what he would prefer to give. His success depended not only on a mutual willingness to connect, but the construction of a shared, relevant, coherent context for practicing literacy and discipline-specific thinking. I didn't understand how to make that happen. I was guessing, and while I was often lucky, he deserved better.

In two weeks, I'll return to the classroom for my fourteenth year of teaching, just about halfway into my teaching career, facing a room full of students who will seem a little less foreign, a little less apathetic, a little less superficial. I'm anticipating that their iPods and cell phones won't be quite as annoying to me, but what I've referred to here as their semiotic landscape will not be less daunting. It will still change rapidly, and I will still feel myself aging rapidly in juxtaposition. What I have now is the reassurance that I have found one comfortable, mutually respectful common ground in visual art and the knowledge I would need to assess possible others. I may not know where the future is taking us, but I learned how to navigate the passage.

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