Teaching Visual Literacy in the 21st Century

"The image survives the subject and becomes the remembered reality."
  - John Szarkowski, Director of Photography Department, Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Council Rock School District (CRSD) curriculum utilizes Visual Literacy to teach critical thinking skills that allow students to interpret images as they would the text of a book. Visual literacy, introduced as an educational concept in the 1960s, teaches students to interpret and understand visual "texts." These texts are defined as any visual, such as artwork, pictures in books, facial expressions, body language, computer images and web sites, movies and video, TV advertisements, international symbols and more. Visual literacy instruction also educates students on how to create and present materials visually.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education, when describing visual literacy on its Standards Aligned System webpage, states "few things bring history to life as well as a professionally created educational video or movie. Movies can bring abstract concepts to life for students and provide vivid counterpoint to a teacher's lesson. Videos allow teachers to bring ancient Egypt, Roman cities, or the inside of a concentration camp to their students. When used properly, with sufficient preparation and discussion in the classroom, video and movies in the Social Studies classroom are a reliable and successful teaching tool." [1]

In fact, visual literacy is emphasized not only in Pennsylvania state standards and incorporated into CRSD's course frameworks, but is a core concept for teacher education in universities throughout the nation. Student teachers must show competency in the use of visual media, and with this expertise in hand, younger teachers often mentor experienced teachers in the use of this valuable educational tool.

Research shows that, beginning in infancy, the majority of information that people absorb is collected through their sense of vision. According to The Visual Literacy White Paper [2], the development of visual skills is important as visual images are becoming a "predominant form of communication across a range of learning and teaching resources, delivered across a range of media and formats. Visual literacy is now crucial for obtaining information, constructing knowledge and building successful educational outcomes." This is especially true of the 21st century learner as we live in an increasingly more visual culture.

According to Mary Alice White, a researcher at Columbia University Teachers College, "young people learn more than half of what they know from visual information, but few schools have an explicit curriculum to show students how to think critically about visual data." In Council Rock, visual literacy is incorporated in all curriculum areas beginning as early as first grade, with Reading/English/Language Arts standards that include listening, speaking and viewing proficiencies. As students have become more computer savvy, Council Rock has introduced PowerPoint and Movie Maker as early as second grade where students use visual media in their research projects about animals. Both the sixth grade assessment and the senior graduation project have a visual requirement.

Course standards and frameworks require students to be able to critically analyze media by evaluating the accuracy of what they view and making informed judgments. Teachers using these materials have a wealth of resources available to them, from a preapproved "bank" in the school libraries to resources from the Bucks County Intermediate Unit, including web based content and information provided by such outlets as National Geographic and the Discovery Channel.

In their first year, as part of continuing development, new CRSD teachers further develop their skills to effectively reach visual learners. Visual resources are helpful in differentiating instruction in the classroom. While some students retain more information from reading, and others from "hands-on" projects, some learn best through visual sources. These materials are more successful in the 21st century because of the plethora of visual outlets for communications.

All media is approved for inclusion in classrooms per CRSD School Board policy 109 (found on the crsd.org website under the School Board tab) and associated Administrative Regulations regarding supplemental materials. This policy (and all Board policies) must be reviewed by the Board solicitor and approved by the CRSD Board. At the high school level, the use of any films carrying an "R" rating has additional policy requirements, as follows:

- "R" rated material may be shown if it is directly related to a particular curriculum area and is approved according to the district video policy.
- All material will be previewed by the individual teacher. Both the district curriculum coordinator and the building administrator must approve all "R" rated material (approved forms for "R" rated movies can be found on the crsd.org website under the Information tab)
- A letter must be sent home to parents, by the initiating teacher, outlining the purpose of the movie and the teacher's intent/purpose in utilizing the material.
- Parent permission, in written form, is required for all students prior to viewing the presentation. Those students or parents objecting to a presentation are to be excused without penalty. An alternative assignment will be given.
- No teacher is required to show an "R" rated movie. The showing of "R" rated material would be based on the individual merits of a particular film and the teacher's professional judgment.

Teachers have the option of using approved movies or videos as excerpts or in their entirety to visually illustrate a concept in the curriculum. Through staff development activities, CRSD teachers are educated about the School Board policies and regulations as they apply to visual media, copyright laws, and best practices in using visual tools.

Visual "texts" are presented via laptops connected to projectors and broadcast on classroom TVs or smart boards. This technology can facilitate a critical analysis of media such as showing clips of movies side by side with actual events. For example, in one high school course, the conversation between David Frost and Richard Nixon in *Frost/Nixon* can be shown next to the news footage of the actual interview, stimulating a critique of how the movie mirrors the actual televised event.

Through CRSD's incorporation of visual literacy as an educational tool, state standards are upheld, and students are taught using best practices to engage students in the 21st century. Citizens For Education applauds the district for its inclusion of visual tools to enhance critical thinking skills, and believes that all students should have the opportunity to be taught using the best audio/visual and written texts chosen by professional curriculum supervisors, educators and administrators (see Curriculum Process article on page___), to accommodate and enhance the coursework of all classes.

[1] Pennsylvania Department of Education, Standards Aligned System. "Presenting a Social Studies Video." Web. 20 Oct. 2010. <http://www.pdesas.org/module/content/resources/390/view.ashx>.
[2] Bamford, Anne, PhD. "The Visual Literacy White Paper." 2004. Web. 20 Oct. 2010. <http://www.adobe.com/uk/education/pdf/adobe_visual_literacy_paper.pdf>.