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Learning Through Looking

By Elizabeth Barrett-Zahn



“A picture is worth a thousand words” has been referred to as a Chinese proverb, yet its true beginnings may be from an advertising man, Fred R. Barnard, as a way to promote images in advertisements. Whether the phrase is to increase consumer purchases or as a wise reflection on the importance of visual information, as teachers, we are always on the lookout for ways to support and enhance student learning.

The term *visual literacy* has been loosely attributed to specific learning styles (i.e., the visual learner), development of discerning interpretation of science statistics and data, and as a way to uncover student thinking through the creation and analysis of models and diagrams. But how does visual literacy fit into the science classroom?

Developing lessons that will support individual learning styles is always a challenge in the elementary classroom, and teachers are always in search of ways to provide visibly interesting and enriching experiences for students. Whether it's visually presenting information or asking students to enhance their observational skills through recognizing details and differences, we are addressing learning through looking.

We cannot deny that we live in an ever-increasing visual world, with technology taking the main stage in developing our understanding of the world's cycles, flows, patterns, and connections through data, charts, graphs, images, and models. Our students will need to decode and encode vast amounts of information repre-

sented digitally or through data and statistics.

Some of what we teach is difficult for students to experience in a hands-on manner; therefore, we must rely on visuals and models to help elucidate the vast or too small to be seen. Space, time, and distances can be challenging for young ones to grasp. Offering ways to make large-scale measurements more meaningful or small-scale representations more understandable is quite a challenge. Allowing students to show what they are thinking by drawing and modeling can be helpful in discovering misconceptions as well as setting the stage for the beginnings of complex understandings.

Providing students with the opportunities to represent concepts and problems in a visual manner will also enhance writing, and critical thinking skills as even the non-writer can engage in explaining their thoughts, understandings, or claims through visuals and images.

This month we offer a broad view of visual literacy with the inclusion of articles as far reaching as debunking advertising claims—watch out Fred R. Barnard, our student won't believe everything they see—to tangibly representing particles to help develop the underpinnings for the understandings of matter. It's a visual world out there, so we must make the most of it to provide our students the opportunities to engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate their thinking and learning.

Elizabeth Barrett-Zahn

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Science and Children

Science & Children [ISSN 0036-8148 (print) 1943-4812 (online)] is published nine times a year [Sept., Oct., Nov./Dec. (combined), Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May (combined), July, and Aug.] by the National Science Teachers Association, 1840 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201-3092. Individual membership dues are \$79 (\$35 for publication, \$44 for membership). Memberships outside the United States (except territories), add \$15 per year for postage. Single copy prices for nonmembers, \$10. Periodicals postage paid at Arlington, VA, and additional mailing offices. Publications Mail Agreement no. 41506028. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4R6 Canada. ©2018 by the National Science Teachers Association, all rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part of any article without permission is prohibited. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Science & Children*, NSTA, 1840 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201-3092.