

**Visual Literacy with Picture Books: The Silk Road**

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Visual literacy is multifaceted. The use of our visual sense is a strong component of how we as humans learn and remember. Many types of visuals can be used to enhance learning including the viewing of objects, both natural and man made and the viewing of events and settings as seen by the human eye or through media such as photographs, videos and illustrations (Baca, 1990). We also communicate information through a variety of media which includes visual representations (Begoray, 2001).

Visual literacy itself is defined as the active reconstruction of past experiences with incoming visual information to obtain meaning (Sinatra, 1986, p5)

For students in classrooms, literacy once meant an ability to read and write. Today students go beyond this basic ability and demonstrate visual literacy frequently when they interpret and comprehend visual information from television and computer screens (Flood, Heath & Lapp, 1997). Classroom teachers do not always incorporate visual literacy into their classroom practice, however. Often the assumption is that students know how to view material without having to be taught skills necessary to accomplish the task (Begoray, 2001).

### **The Ancient Silk Routes**

Why study and try to visualize the people and places along the ancient silk routes? A child in the United States today lives in a closely interconnected world, wears clothing produced in a country on the other side of the globe and eats food grown on another continent. Understanding how countries on different continents communicated and traded before modern technological innovations is important as a background for understanding our interconnected world of today. Additionally, the topic fits into the elementary social studies curriculum that includes comparative communities and locations in the third grade and ancient civilizations in the sixth grade.

The Silk Road stretched from western China to the Middle East, crossing deserts and mountains. From its beginnings over two thousand years ago, it was never one route but a series of caravan routes used for trade and the interaction between many different people led to a transferal of culture along these trade routes (Leavens, 2004). The result of these interactions was a transformation in religion, art and the use of commodities such as silk. The trade routes extended as far north as Russia and as far south as India, but the main routes crossed central Asia, including western provinces of China such as Xinjiang, the former republics of the Soviet Union such as Uzbekistan, and inner Asia including Mongolia and Inner

Mongolia (Amster & Chen, 2004; Wood, 2003). The best known western traveler along these routes and the one most likely to be familiar to elementary students in the United States is the Italian, Marco Polo. In this lesson illustrations of the main route from China through central Asia are used.

### **Visualizing the Peoples and Places of the Silk Road**

The purpose of the lesson in this study is to use the elements of visual literacy to introduce elementary students to the peoples and places of the ancient silk routes. The visual representations used are illustrations from two picture books *Marco Polo* written and illustrated by Gian Paolo Cesaerani (1977) and *We're Riding on a Caravan: An Adventure on the Silk Road* (2005) written by Laurie Krebs and illustrated by Helen Cann. The first book depicts the journey of Marco Polo from Italy to China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The second is a child's rhyming book depicting a caravan that travels from Xi'an, the ancient capital of China, through the trading centers of western China and into Central Asia to the trading center of Samarkand.

A variety of illustrations were chosen from the books to use with elementary students. The illustrations range from simple compositions with a few structures and figures to more complicated compositions with many structures and figures. A photo analysis worksheet (nara.gov) was adapted to assist the students in studying the illustrations. The objective of the activity is for students to construct an understanding of the nature of people, objects, places and activities along the ancient silk routes by using visual information from the book illustrations and applying their own past experiences to what they see in the illustrations.

### **A Lesson with Visual Literacy**

#### **The Illustrations:**

<b>Book</b>	<b><i>Marco Polo</i> Gian Paolo Cesaerani</b>	<b><i>We're Riding on a Caravan: An Adventure on the Silk Road</i> Laurie Krebs &amp; Helen Cann</b>
<b>1</b>	Mongol yurt with horses, camels, child playing and rider with quiver of arrows and wearing fur hat and long robe made from animal skins	<b>1</b> Small caravan with two Bactrian camels with sacks of goods and riders. Riders have east Asian features and are in Chinese dress. Wheeled cart pulled by a donkey and led by a man in Muslim dress with a long robe and a head covering
<b>2</b>	Two yurts (one under construction) with Mongolian men, women and children engaged in daily chores typical	<b>2</b> Mixture of people in a market setting, some with long robes and head coverings, others in Chinese dress. Sacks of grain and bolts of material for sale are displayed on colorful rugs on the ground

of a nomadic people

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| <p><b>3</b> The ancient walled Chinese capitol of Xi'an with gate to the walled city and many different people, animals and activities depicted (first of a double page)</p> | <p><b>3</b> Similar scene to second illustration from <i>We're Riding on a Caravan</i> with market setting, a variety of products for sale and different central and east Asian people</p>  |
| <p><b>4</b> The ancient walled Chinese capitol of Xi'an with a river bridge and many different people, animals and activities depicted (second of double page)</p>           | <p><b>4</b> Both turbaned central Asians in long robes and east Asians with horses, goats and sheep in a market setting</p> <p><b>5</b> Packing up market wares by the same individuals that appear in the first illustration. Animals include a camel and two yaks</p> |

### **The Activity:**

Using a photo analysis worksheet developed by the education staff of the National Archives and Records Administration, the students were asked to engage in the following activities:

1. Study the illustration
  - a) Form an overall impression of the illustration
  - b) Examine individual items.
  - c) Divide the illustration into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.
2. List people, objects and activities in the illustration
3. Based on your observations in steps 1 & 2, list three things that you might infer from the illustration
4. What questions does this illustration raise in your mind?
5. Where could you find answers to them

A group of elementary teachers teaching in low performing and low socio-economic status schools in New York City used the illustrations and worksheet with their students. The students ranged from kindergarten to sixth grade. The teachers were part of a graduate social studies methods course and completed the activity as a class assignment.

### **Discussion of Student and Teacher Responses to the Illustrations**

The following discussion of the illustrations and the reaction of elementary students to it concentrates on two areas from Sinatra's definition of visual literacy; what the students observed and the prior knowledge they brought to their observations.

Cesaerani: Illustrations 1 & 2  
(Mongol camps along the Silk Road)

Student Responses: The student who observed and reacted to these illustrations was a fifth grader. He was very straightforward and literal in describing what he saw. His list of people included a child and an adult. The objects listed were animals and the activities were cooking, playing, building, making pottery and starting a fire. When asked to infer from the illustrations he listed what he saw rather than inferring or predicting. He stated that the men were building a tent and that the women were making pottery. His questions included who are these people, where do they come from and why do they use horses and not camels? The last question is the only one that demonstrates some prior knowledge pertaining to the silk routes since the Bactrian camel is common to the Gobi Desert where many Mongols lived.

- Teacher Comments: Student was unfamiliar with inquiry using visual comprehension without explanatory text. Student was also unfamiliar with an open ended inquiry that had no right or wrong answers. Consequently the student was anxious about the activity but concentrated intensely on the illustration. The teacher felt that vocabulary such as inference was difficult for the student and would consider simpler vocabulary such as prediction in place of inference.

Cesaerani: Illustration 3  
(Walled city of Xi'an)

One teacher used the complex illustration of Xi'an with one of its walls and gates with her full sixth grade class. The class was studying ancient Rome and was due to study China as their next unit. The second teacher used only one student. The first teacher used a smart board and was able to enlarge and project the picture. She modified the lesson and asked the students first to list everything that they saw, then sort the list into similar groups and then give each group a name or label. Another teacher used the full lesson including inferences and questions with two second graders and two sixth graders. The third teacher used the full activity with one student.

Second Grade  
(2 students)

Sixth Grade  
(Full class of 35 students  
2 students  
1 student)

Student Response The students needed guidance from the teacher. They were excited but at first were overwhelmed by the illustration. They brought prior knowledge to the exercise knowing that the picture was of China, but then confused China with Chinatown which they had actually experienced. They were very observant of the picture, noticing a chaise carrier and a woman that they called an empress being given food

Full class worked in groups with a modified lesson of list, sort and group. Two students worked as a pair and one student worked independently.

Full Class: Groups of students organized the components of the illustration into a variety of categories including animals, people, plants, buildings, bodies of water, land and businesses. The students had little prior knowledge of China, but did make some connections. One student wrote that the Great Wall of China instead of the wall around the ancient city of Xian was in the picture.

Two Students: Their observations were at first incorrect, saying that the picture was of a farm, explaining that there was green in the illustration. They noticed the chaise carrier and knew that it was for a high ranking person. In applying prior knowledge they said that the picture was of Chinatown, not China.

One Student: The student listed many of the people and objects but also noticed activities such as buying and selling and praying. Student inferred that the many people in the illustration came from different social classes. He also inferred that Xi'an was an important city and wanted to know if it needed to be guarded.

Teacher Response Needed to simplify some of the vocabulary – from quadrant to smaller squares, need to extend local knowledge (Chinatown) into global knowledge (China)

Full Class and One Student: The students enjoyed the activity, but both teachers felt it would be more useful when students had some prior knowledge of ancient China, possibly as a final activity after a study of China

Two Students: In contrast this teacher thought the lesson was an excellent beginning activity for a unit of study with any topic. The students can use the questions about the picture to build a K(know) W(want to know) L (learned) chart for the unit.

Lower Elementary Grades: Four teachers used the illustrations from Krebs and Cann with the lower elementary grades. One teacher worked with a first grade student, another teacher worked with two higher functioning third graders, another worked with three average functioning third graders and the last teacher worked with a mixed level bilingual class, many of who have limited English language skills. The bilingual teacher used a modified version of the activity in which the students listed what they saw in the illustration, grouped them together and labeled them. She also projected the illustrations onto a smart board for the students.

	<u>First Grade</u> (1 Student)	<u>Third Grade</u> (4 Students 2 Students)	<u>Bilingual Mixed Level</u> (Full Class of 35 Students)
<u>Student Response:</u>	The teacher used the third illustration with the first grade student. She needed to read the activity questions to the student and reword some of the instructions, inferring for example. Child related the picture to his own experience as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic. He inferred that people in the illustration were traveling to find a better place to live. He thought they had no beds or tables because everything was spread out on the ground. He knew that people in the picture were different from him and said that they were Russian, Indian, Chinese and Trinidadian.	The first third grade teacher used illustration two and three with her students. The students inferred that the people in the second illustration were poor and sad. They inferred that the same people in the third illustration were happier and better off. They understood that the illustrations show a market setting, a new vocabulary work that the applied to the illustration. They wanted to know why the people were in the place of the illustration, what they were selling and why.  The second third grade teacher did not give much instruction to her higher functioning third graders. The students were thorough in the listing of people, objects and activities but were very literal in the description of the people. They did not infer that they were Chinese or Muslim. They did infer however that the location of the illustration was India, since that is the unit they are studying.	The students grouped the many components of the illustration into a limited number of categories including people, animals, food and things. Under things were included such objects as bushels, mats and hay. Often they know how to describe a component of the illustration in Spanish, but not in English. The teacher assisted in the translation from Spanish to English.

		They thought the illustration was a photograph and they could interview the people in the illustration.	
<u>Teacher Response:</u>	The illustration was very motivating for the student because of the bright colors and not an overwhelming amount of people, objects or activities. The activity needs to be rewritten for a primary child's level of understanding. Keywords, such as market, would help the student relate more to the illustrations activities and reading the book <i>We're Riding on a Caravan</i> before the picture analysis would add to the students prior knowledge.	The first teacher felt the students needed some guidance at the first of the activity, but then found them very observant and thoughtful. She felt that an introduction to the Silk Road as a trade route would help the students with inferences and conclusions about the illustration.	The students worked individually and the teacher felt that they would benefit from working in pairs. A discussion of the illustrations before observation would help as well as modeling with a simpler picture.
		The second third grade teacher also thought the activity could benefit from some guidance at first with questions that would provoke thought. Also modeling with a simple picture would help. Similar to the first third grade teacher she thought that the picture analysis would benefit from prior knowledge about the Silk Road.	

Upper Elementary Grades: One fifth grade teacher and one sixth grade teacher used the same illustrations with small groups. The fifth grade teacher used the activity that included inference and questioning. The sixth grade teacher modified the activity to listing, grouping and labeling.

Fifth Grade  
(3 students in a group)

Sixth Grade  
(3 students in a group)

<u>Student Responses:</u>	They noticed the dress of the people and noted that they looked Chinese. They identified that they were traveling and that the illustration shows a marketplace. They wanted to know where they are, why are they wearing clothes that do not look like twenty first century clothes and what country they are from. They said that they could find answers to their questions by finding people who looked like the people in the illustration and asking them.	The students were able to break down the illustration and observe the different parts of it. New York State has a document based question in the state test on the fifth grade level and the students are familiar at the upper elementary level with a variety of documents. The students demonstrated prior knowledge of Chinese customs because of the presence of bowing in one of the illustrations. They demonstrated prior knowledge from a previous lesson on the Silk Road and correctly identified the people in the illustrations as Chinese and Middle
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Teacher Responses: The students found the illustrations interesting and did well with the activities. The activity would have been more beneficial if included in a unit of study on the Silk Road.

Eastern. They also identified the products in the sacks on the ground as spices.

The students were able to produce quality responses because of prior knowledge of documents and how to observe components of documents and a previous lesson on the Silk Road. The teacher suggested a follow up writing assignment in which the students could elaborate on what they observed in the illustrations

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