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Capturing Stories in Motion: Visual Elements as Tools for Analyzing and Composing Animated Narratives

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This special issue of *CITE Journal* considers "the complexities of digital texts and how to teach them" (Jones et al. 2025). In line with this theme, this article takes a closer look at animation, focusing on the ways that visual elements can serve as tools for close reading and creative composition. It shares findings from a qualitative study of 13 undergraduate students who were enrolled in a Visual Narratives course. Data sources included 39 course artifacts (i.e., animation analysis papers, original animation projects, and project reflections), and materials were analyzed using grounded theory and open coding. Data analysis revealed that participants employed visual elements in ways that supported narrative/literary study (e.g., regarding characterization, setting, mood, plot, and symbol). Documenting a clear overlap between animation study and traditional English content, the author recommends that visual elements and animation be included in English teacher education as part of a larger effort to address digital, visual, and multimodal forms of communication.

Placed into a sequence, a series of images can trick the eye into perceiving motion. Blobs of clay can become amusing characters who travel to the moon (*Wallace and Gromit: A Grand Day Out*; Park, 1990). Skeletons can come to life and fight (*Jason and the Argonauts;* Chaffey, 1963). An enormous, grunting forest spirit can soar through the air (*My Neighbor Totoro;* Miyazaki, 1988). A cat can survive a flood and make new friends along the way — all without a word of dialogue spoken (*Flow;* Zilbalodis, 2024). Years can pass in seconds, conveying both the joy of falling in love and the devastation of loss (*Up;* Docter, 2009). Through animation, viewers can imagine possible futures, including those they would do well to avoid (*WALL-E;* Stanton, 2008), or be reassured that it *is* possible to make one's way in the world, even without believing in oneself or knowing one's destination (*Kiki's Delivery Service;* Miyazaki, 1990).

Throughout its history, animation has moved, delighted, and inspired audiences. Beginning in 1832 with the phenakistoscope (i.e., a wheel with images that was spun to create a sense of movement), this technology has evolved to include traditional cel animation (i.e., layers of figures and backgrounds on celluloid sheets), rotoscoping (i.e., painting on film), stop-motion and Claymation, and various forms of computer animation, including 2D and 3D animation (Bloop Animation, 2015; Murphy, 2015).

Animation's status continues to rise in the film world. *Sight and Sound's* list of the greatest films of all time (British Film Institute, 2022), a poll conducted once every 10 years, now includes three animated films on the critics' list: No. 72 *My Neighbor Totoro* (Miyazaki, 1988), No. 75 *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), and No. 225 *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata, 1988).

While animation has much in common with other visual and multimodal forms of storytelling (e.g., graphic novels, comics, picture books, and film), it is rarely studied in English education or presented on at conferences for English teachers (Williams, 2020). This may be because of the increasingly strict rules governing media use in today's secondary classrooms (Prothero et al., 2024) or because the medium is written off as cartoons for children (Gallinat, 2022). The educational potential of animation has yet to be fully explored or realized.

This special issue considers "the complexities of digital texts and how to teach them" (Jones et al., 2025). In line with this theme, this article takes a closer look at animation, focusing on the ways that visual elements can serve as tools for both close reading and creative composition. The sections that follow provide a literature review on animation pedagogy, a description of an undergraduate English course that includes animation analysis and composition, and information about a study of that course.

The study found that participants used visual elements to engage in close reading of animation and to explain design choices in their own animated works. Their use of visual elements supported narrative/literary study (e.g., characters, setting, mood, plot, and symbols). In other words, this study documents a clear overlap between animation study and traditional English content. It is recommended that visual elements and animation be included in English teacher education as part of a larger effort to address digital, visual, and multimodal forms of communication.

Literature Review: Teaching Animation

Animation study can have many benefits for students. This medium can support learners in building visual literacy skills, deepening cultural knowledge, and practicing self-reflection (Chandler-Olcott, 2008). Studying animation has also been found to be beneficial for English language learners; in one study, researchers discovered that working with animated texts helped students develop their writing skills, critical thinking, and confidence (Lee & Lee, 2025).

Many viewing paths are possible for making sense of animated works (Williams, 2020):

1. Animation can be studied as stories that contain characters, plot, and other literary elements.

2. These works can be used to help students cultivate multimodal literacies, as they contain images, sound, and other modes.

3. Like any creative piece, animation embodies aspects of the time, place, and culture in which it was created.

4. Source materials (e.g., texts that influenced the animated work) can be studied to spark discussions about what was used, changed, and omitted. That is, learners can discover how *transmediation* (Harste, 2000) works as a story is reworked from one form into another.

5. Knowledge of the director can be used to interpret the work.

6. They can be examined as objects of critical or economic value.

7. Animated works can be read as being in conversation with other texts (i.e., intertextuality).

8. They can be interpreted through critical lenses or schools of literary criticism (examining gender, class, race, etc.).

9. Viewers can connect these works to their own personal experiences.

10. Animation can be read as a moment within the history of that medium/form, as it draws on existing "tools, programs, techniques, conventions, processes, and possibilities," as well as "types" (e.g., traditional cel animation, stop-motion, computer animation, etc.) even as the creators attempt to forge something new (Williams, 2020, p. 649).

In English education, animation could be used to teach preservice teachers about out-of-school literacies (Williams, 2022), showing them that the digital texts students care about in their lives outside of school are works that are worthy of study in the classroom. Animation analysis could be taught to support the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO],

2010), as learners could "evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media" (p. 35) and "gather relevant information from print and digital sources…" (p. 41).

Animation study need not be limited to analysis work, however. As scholars have long argued, digital composition offers many benefits and engages students deeply in their learning (Davis et al., 2021; Kajder, 2007; Miller, 2007). Composing an animated work invites creativity, encourages decision-making, and fosters joy. In addition, it can support academic goals, alter the power dynamics of the classroom in a positive way, and help teachers and students expand their ideas about what counts as writing (Williams, 2022). Many of the habits of mind that are needed for success with postsecondary writing — that is, curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011) — can be cultivated through multimodal forms like animation.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students in a band class had the option to create an animated work or other creative project. Their teacher found the following:

> [Students] created totally original stories, explored avant-garde film techniques, and developed new worlds and realms. Without [the teacher's] direct assistance, students sought out and used animation software, built worlds and characters within video games, composed their own film scores, experimented with lighting and sound effects, used puppetry, and even painstakingly created minutes of video using stop-motion. (Breadon, 2022, p. 96)

Through multimodal composition, these students were inspired to grapple with challenges and find solutions.

Of course, animated works do not have to tell a story. Some animated texts share information or present an argument meant to persuade (Fox, 2007). Composing animation for informational purposes has been studied in other disciplines. For example, Hoban and Nielsen (2014) found that having science preservice teachers make a "Slowmation" (a stop-motion animation with voiceover) to explain moon phases was beneficial for prompting discussions that encouraged scientific reasoning. Using animation in this way in English classrooms could support Common Core Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) for persuasive, expository, and research writing. Furthermore, this work can involve making use of "technology…to produce and publish" and can be part of a larger goal of composing "for a range of tasks, purposes and audiences" (p. 41).

English teachers need to be prepared for "critically accessing, consuming, curating, and creating texts (e.g., print, digital, media)" (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2021) and to "critically engage media and popular culture" (Lyiscott et al. , 2021, p. 2). In addition, teachers must help students interpret the huge amount of "information they encounter, use, and share" (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020, p. 37).

Teacher educators have an important role to play in this work, and they cannot assume that preservice teachers know how to teach digital

literacies just because they live in a digital world (Buckley-Marudas & Martin, 2020). They can help preservice teachers engage in digital, visual, and multimodal communication; gain practice using new technologies in their teaching; and provide time and space to reflect on these experiences (Williams, 2014).

A Visual Narratives Course

Since 2017, I have been teaching a visual narratives course I developed for my university. It takes students through different forms of visual storytelling, including picture books, comics/graphic novels, short films, movies, and animation. There are short modules on photography and videogames, as well. This English course has run in 7-week online and 15-week in-person formats at the undergraduate and graduate levels. No prior experience with art or filmmaking is required. The course regularly attracts students from a wide range of programs, including English, education, business, engineering, science, and the arts. The course description, goals, weekly topics, and major assignments for an undergraduate version of this course can be found in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1
Course Description and Goals

Course Description

Students will read, analyze, and craft visual narratives in this course. Some forms of visual narratives students will work with include picturebooks, comic books, graphic novels, photography, videos, short films, TV shows, film, animation, and videogames.

Course Goals

1. Explore visual storytelling through a range of forms.
2. Learn about art and design elements that are commonly used in visual storytelling.
3. Analyze the art and design elements at work in visual narratives and the ways they impact the story.
4. Compose visual narratives that effectively employ art and design elements.

Figure 2
Weekly Topics and Major Assignments

Weekly Topics and Major Assignments (See Canvas for detailed information about each week's activities.)

Week 1	Picturebooks	Picturebook Analysis Due 8/28
Week 2	Comic Books and Graphic Novels	Paper 1 Due 9/4
Week 3	Photography / Creative Project 1	Creative Project 1 Due 9/11
Week 4	Videos and Short Films	Video/Short Film Analysis Due 9/18
Week 5	TV Shows and Film	TV Show/Film Analysis Due 9/25
Week 6	Animation	Paper 2 Due 10/2
Week 7	Videogames / Creative Project 2	Creative Project 2 Due 10/9

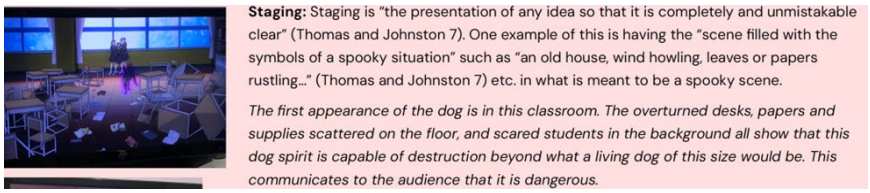
During the course, students acquire a toolkit of metalanguage for making sense of visual communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; New London Group, 1996). These visual elements consist of art and design elements such as line, color, and position (Bang, 2016; Serafini, 2014) and film

concepts such as close-ups, Dutch angles, and mise-en-scène (Golden, 2001; Trustees of Columbia University, 2015). In previous research, I found that students were able to apply many visual elements across a wide variety of forms of visual storytelling (Williams, 2019). For example, elements like borders/framing/surface divisions could be used with picture books, comic books, graphic novels, film, or animation — as could color, shape, or any number of other visual elements. In addition to acquiring a versatile toolkit of visual elements for visual analysis and composition, students read about specific visual narrative forms, developing a greater understanding of picture books (Hintz & Tribunella, 2013), comics/graphic novels (McCloud, 1994), film (Van Sijll, 2005), and animation (Thomas & Johnston, 1981) as distinct vehicles for storytelling.

When I first started teaching this course, I assigned several short analysis papers, one per form (e.g., picture book, comic/graphic novel, short film, movie, animation; see Figure 2). Later, to fit my university's "literacy" general studies designation, I organized the five short analysis papers into two longer papers (a picture book/graphic novel paper and a short film/movie/animation paper).

More recently, I have asked students to organize analysis content into slideshows, a format that helps them (and me) quickly see that all required pieces are included and clearly tracks the rhetorical moves students are making. Regardless of the format these analyses have taken throughout the years, I have consistently asked students to name the visual elements, define them using quotes and citations from our assigned readings, and explain the effects of these design choices (i.e., What information is conveyed?). Analysis assignments give students a chance to apply their knowledge of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to visual narratives they have selected. These assignments always ask that students include photos or screenshots from their visual narrative to help illustrate the points they are making. Figure 3 provides an excerpt from an analysis slideshow.

Figure 3
Sample Visual Element Observation



In addition to analyzing visual narratives, students make creative projects. After studying picture books and comics/graphic novels, students compose a short picture book, comic, or graphic novel chapter (typically 12 picture book pages or comic/graphic novel panels). After studying short films, movies, and animation, I ask students to compose a short film or animated work (typically 15-30 seconds for animation or 1-2 minutes for a short film, depending on the complexity involved). Stills from sample animation projects can be found in Appendix A.

When students submit their creative projects, they also turn in a reflection that describes the story, tools and process used, and five visual elements

used and the effects of those design choices. In addition, they document multiple stages or layers of the project using two or three photos. These days, I ask for the photographs to be selfies, showing the student alongside their work at the different stages. This helps me see what went into the project and helps to document that the project is, in fact, theirs.

Students have opportunities to share their creative projects with others through gallery walks and film screenings (Williams, 2025). Some of them also choose to share their work with their networks, using Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok. As Aleo (2025) pointed out, this kind of student interest in getting their work out to a larger audience "complicates popular notions that young people are not interested in the humanities and knowledge production." I have found that students take pride in composing in forms they care about.

In the course, I usually introduce the concept of visual literacy right away through short videos featuring expert filmmakers and art scholars (Kennedy, 2013; Lucas, 2012; Scorsese, 2012). We also talk about how the visual mode is just one of many modes in a multimodal composition (New London Group, 1996).

In other animation courses I teach, like my Studio Ghibli Films course, we delve into the auditory mode as well, exploring different instruments (*Twenty-five musical instruments of Japan*, 2022; *Instruments of the orchestra*, 2021), sound effects (*Foley sound effects,* n.d.), and songs from the animated films (Hisaishi, 2019). I also point out musical elements and their effects, such as the pluckiness that *pizzicato* conveys in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Miyazaki, 1990) or the feeling of being swept away because of the **1**-2-3, **1**-2-3, **1**-2-3…beat of a *waltz* in *Howl's Moving Castle* (Miyazaki, 2004). There is certainly room to explore a whole range of modes when studying animated films, but in the *visual* narratives course, focus is on visuals.

Over the years of offering the visual narratives course, I have added material on manga, anime, and visual novels. More recently, I have turned the final week into an exploration of interactive storytelling (including videogames, virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality) that culminates in a visit to our university's Dreamscape Learn Virtual Reality Lab, where students can experience how visual storytelling is being used to teach chemistry and art history in virtual worlds. Other changes have included adding open-book quizzes on the visual elements and short, hands-on exercises (e.g., a drawing practice or a camera angle/movement exercise) as scaffolding for the larger creative projects.

The Study

To better understand how students in my course used visual elements with animation, I conducted a qualitative study with 13 undergraduate students who chose to do animation for their final projects. All participants were recruited using Institutional Review Board consent forms after their course had ended and final grades were posted. Six of the students were English majors, and the others were studying secondary education English, astrophysics, professional flight, preveterinary medicine, graphic design, painting, or intermedia art.

Two research questions guided the study:

1. How did participants use their knowledge of visual elements to engage in close reading of animated works?

2. How did participants use their knowledge of visual elements to explain the design choices they had made in their own animated compositions?

This study focused on participant-created artifacts (Bowen, 2009; Merriam, 2009) to answer these questions, and it involved analyzing 39 items in all: 13 animation analysis papers, 13 original animation projects, and 13 project reflections. After participants joined the study, their course materials were downloaded from Canvas and coded in NVivo.

I used a grounded theory approach that consisted of open coding and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Saldaña, 2009). To answer the first research question, I read the animation analysis papers and coded any mentions of visual elements. I then sorted these coded items into descriptive categories. This resulted in five categories: characters, setting/world, mood/atmosphere, action/sequencing, and symbolic meaning.

To answer the second research question, I viewed the participants' original animation compositions, read their artist statements, and coded the visual elements they used to explain their design choices. Sorting these visual elements into descriptive categories quickly revealed categories that mirrored those that had emerged through data analysis for the first research question. With the remaining coded data, I then questioned whether each item would fit better in a new category or an existing one. The existing categories worked best, so the same five categories were used for both sets of data (i.e., visual analysis and composition).

Ultimately, this process revealed that whether participants were doing analysis or composition work, they made use of visual elements to understand or convey narrative information (i.e., details about characters, the setting/world, the mood/atmosphere, action/sequencing, or the use of symbolic meaning).

Using Visual Elements to Engage in Close Reading of Animated Works

This study found that participants used their knowledge of visual elements to engage in close reading of animation. With a toolkit of visual elements on hand (gathered from course readings), they identified 20 different visual elements at work. Although rooted in visual information, these observations cast light on narrative or literary features of the works. Participants noticed details about characters, the setting/world, the mood/atmosphere of the work, action/sequencing, and symbolism in animated narratives (see Appendix B).

The participants used visual elements to examine characterization in animated works. Some of their observations dealt with the physical appearance of characters. That is, participants noticed how exaggeration,

animal characteristics, and lighting emphasized characters' physical traits. As an example, one human character had teeth that looked like fangs, suggesting that he was dangerous and to be avoided. Another set of observations they made about characterization in animated texts had to do with the characters' inner lives. Participants noticed how point of view and camera angle helped viewers enter characters' imaginations (e.g., visualizing smells) or experience feelings of disorientation and confusion. Another set of observations about characterization dealt with comparisons. Positioning and size and scale showed visual contrast, communicating information about a character's power or lack thereof.

A second category of visual elements illuminated the setting or world of the story, done through exterior and interior views of spaces. Participants noticed that long shots (positioning the camera far from a subject), focus, and negative space were used to give a sense of a character's place within the world of the story. In addition, the way an interior space was staged could provide important information. For example, a torn-apart classroom could communicate the destruction that happened there.

Surface divisions provided an opportunity to see both the inside and outside at once, as they allow for a frame with the frame (e.g., a doorway or window showing another view). As one participant noted, this can be done to show a contrast between the light of the inside with the darkness of the outside. This technique was made famous by *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), which shows different actions happening at once: adults meeting inside while a child is playing outside.

Just as an author can create an atmosphere or mood for a short story through their word choice, this feeling is created in animated works through a series of choices about art style. Participants noticed that the choice of medium affected the feeling of a work (e.g., stop-motion animation vs. 3D animation). Also, whether images were rendered with a high modality (i.e., realistic looking) or low modality (i.e., unrealistic looking) communicated information about the story. Even color contributes to the mood of a piece. This can involve choices about the basic color palette of a work (e.g., primary colors or pastels, light or dark tones), the coloring of individual objects to draw attention, or scenes in which a warm or cool filter is used for effect. As one participant noticed, red was used to communicate violence.

Participants made observations about action and sequencing in animated works. Specifically, they commented on movement within a space, from a space, and through time. They noticed the ways that timing worked, sometimes with characters moving in different ways or at different speeds within a space. Another observation was that a camera could remain in place while the action carried on into the distance. They also noticed how editing enabled movement through time with flashbacks.

The final category of analysis dealt with symbolic representation. Just as in literature, items in an animated work can hold a deeper meaning. Participants noticed that a character's belongings or objects within the setting could communicate information. A watch could represent a second chance or bricks could communicate stability.

Using Visual Elements to Explain Design Choices

Participants in this study also used visual elements to communicate narrative/literary information in their own animation projects. These elements contributed to the development of characters, the setting/world, and the mood/atmosphere; they were used to control action/sequencing; and they helped convey symbolic meaning (see Appendix C). These five narrative/literary categories mirror those used in the previous section.

In explaining the visual elements they used for their characters, participants mentioned that pointed shapes conveyed ferocity and that using squash and stretch with the eyes conveyed playfulness. They used a close-up shot to establish emotional closeness to a character and communicate the character's sense of awe. A surface divider was used to show physical and emotional distance between characters. Participants also created visual contrast between characters through size and scale, and they used lighting to draw attention to characters.

Regardless of the type of animation they created, the participants had to consider how they would construct the world or setting of the story. For a stop-motion animation that mixed humans with toys that would come to life, that meant thinking about the staging of the scene and showing a dresser that would be important later (i.e., when the toys would come to life). Another participant thought about what it would mean to shoot a stop-motion animation about dinosaurs and realized it made sense to get down on the ground to see things from these characters' points of view. All of the camera angles would use that height as a starting point.

Participants drew upon their knowledge of visual elements to explain how they had created a particular mood or atmosphere in their work. They thought about the emotional effect of a zoom on viewers (i.e., it would create a thrill), and they used demand (i.e., when a character looks directly at the viewer) to establish a connection with the audience and share a knowing look. They also made decisions about the style of the work through their choices about modality, the degree to which the work was realistic or not. In addition, one student believed that using the rule of thirds to place characters in the frame would "achieve the highest level of visual aesthetics."

They discussed their attempts to control the action and sequencing through visual elements. Considering how to arrange the space to set up later events, a participant put a heart in the center of the frame, not just to give it attention but because it was essential that viewers see the heart "when it breaks." They also manipulated time, making some actions take longer or using dissolves to convey that time had passed. Participants even inserted additional frames to achieve "anticipation," an animation concept that involves showing the wind up to an action instead of only the action itself (e.g., bringing a fist back before punching forward). In that project, those extra frames gave more attention to the exaggerated action of the character opening its mouth wide before eating a cookie.

Participants also manipulated perspective. A participant used first person point of view to show things from the character's point of view. Although the audience thinks the character is surprised to see she is hurt in her

reflection, a major reveal happens later. The character is a monster, so when she was surprised earlier, it was because she saw a human face reflected (not because she was injured). Thinking through these events ahead and using perspective to selectively reveal important aspects of the story at particular moments was an interesting choice.

Regarding symbolic meaning, a participant wrote about the use of color. A heart was red to communicate love. This shorthand allowed the person to communicate meaning through a popular trope.

Discussion

Teachers play an important role in helping students make sense of the overwhelming amount of information they are confronted with (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020), and this study showed that visual elements are tools that can enable students to dig deeply into complex digital texts like animated films. Recall that participants commented on camera angles, shots, and movement, as well as color, shape, size and scale, editing, and more. These visual elements helped them to notice the physical appearances of characters and details about their inner lives, interior and exterior spaces, movement across time and space, and other aspects of these animated narratives.

It can be overwhelming to look at an image — let alone a moving one — and know how to read closely in a medium like animation. Complicating this, many people grow up consuming animation without questioning these works or the powerful corporations that produce them (Giroux, 1998). Visual elements offer a way for students to interrogate these texts, providing language for noticing and communicating visual observations.

In my teaching and research, I have found that many visual elements have wide applicability across different text types and genres, these tools are relatively easy for students to grasp, and there is a high degree of transferability between analysis and composition tasks (Williams, 2019). Pantaleo (2025) found that even kindergarteners can use visual elements, including color, framing, point-of-view, perspective, and line, to explain their artwork.

The animation analysis findings in this study show evidence of visual literacy (Chandler-Olcott, 2008) and critical thinking (Lee & Lee, 2025). This work suggests that visual elements could be taught in English education programs to provide preservice teachers (and their future students) with tools to evaluate texts in different media (NGA & CCSSO, 2010; Williams, 2019).

The animation composition findings in this study shed light on creative decision-making. Participants employed art concepts like color and shape, film concepts like camera movement and editing, animation concepts like anticipation and squash and stretch, and more. These visual elements enabled participants to communicate important narrative/literary information pertaining to characters, setting/world, mood/style, action/plot, and symbols.

Researchers have argued that composing animated works can build students' writing skills (Lee & Lee, 2025), and this study shows some ways that can happen. Participants in this study considered the physical traits of characters and how they would show visual contrast between them. They worked with materials in a setting, imagined their audience, thought about art style, and even drew upon familiar tropes. Perhaps most interestingly (because of the complexity involved), they manipulated time, space, and perspective. After all, there are dimensions to think about when composing an animated narrative that go well beyond writing a narrative text on paper. Animated narratives are literally *in motion*. Time, space, and perspective matter. This study uncovered some of the sophisticated work that happens even in animated works that appear to be simple.

Digital composition can be deeply engaging for students (Davis et al., 2021; Kajder, 2007; Miller, 2007); perhaps one reason is because of the many factors that need to be considered at once in a multimodal composition. There are extra layers of challenge in these compositions, which students may find exciting. In addition, animation — like video composing — invites student agency (Miller & Bruce, 2017). Making a short, animated composition can involve not only visuals but also music and sound effects (Breadon, 2022). At the same time, the narrative itself requires writers to make various choices.

Implications for English Teacher Education

Bringing animation into English teacher education could spark conversations about out-of-school literacies (Williams, 2022), audience (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), popular culture, and critical media literacy (Lyiscott et al., 2021). Using this form in teacher education also reinforces the idea that teachers and students need to work with a multitude of texts, including digital ones (NCTE, 2021).

Even though preservice teachers are surrounded by digital texts, we cannot expect them to automatically think critically about these texts or feel comfortable teaching them (Buckley-Marudas & Martin, 2020). Therefore, teacher education programs must include opportunities for preservice teachers to work with different forms, employ a range of tools and technologies in mini-lessons, and reflect on their experiences (Williams, 2014). Animation and visual elements can easily be integrated into this work.

Building on previous work on visual elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2014; Williams, 2019) and animation (Williams, 2020, 2022) this study helps show why visual elements and animation study are relevant in today's English classrooms and why they should be included in teacher education, as well. To begin with, these digital texts and tools can support the teaching of close reading. It is recommended that preservice teachers learn about multimodality and metalanguage (New London Group, 1996), including visual elements (Bang, 2016; Golden, 2001; Serafini, 2014; Trustees of Columbia University, 2015), in their teacher education programs. A small investment of time in this work can have much payoff, as many of the rules of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) are applicable across different forms of visual

communication (Hintz & Tribunella, 2013; McCloud, 1994; Thomas & Johnston, 1981; Van Sijll, 2005).

To get started with this work, I recommend assigning Chapter 5 from Serafini's (2014) book, *Reading the Visual*. Educators could bring in animation, or even just some screenshots from these works, and the class could engage in visual analysis together using the language from Serafini's chapter (e.g., color, line, shape, position, and so forth). They could include additional forms of visual, multimodal, and digital works, too.

This study also demonstrates how digital texts and tools can support creative composition. We know that preservice teachers and their future students need "opportunities to move from consumers to producers of content" (NCTE, 2019). In addition, incorporating opportunities for multimodal composition can give leaners "a rich communicative palette from which to share complex ideas in innovative and personalized ways" (Smith, 2023, p. 575). Since it can feel overwhelming trying to keep pace with the shifting demands placed upon teachers as definitions of literacy change with new technologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), I recommend starting small with animation composition. Students could attempt a short animation project in class, perhaps making a 5-second stop-motion animation with a free phone app like Stop Motion Studio. This activity could follow literary study or a narrative writing exercise. Larger projects could be incorporated later, as time allows.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that visual elements can carry important narrative/literary information. By noticing how position, shot, color, editing, or shape work, viewers can attend to details about characters, setting, mood, plot, or symbol. These visual elements can also be harnessed as tools for composing stories.

One important takeaway from this study, then, is that animation analysis and composition share important overlaps with English content. Viewers can look at an animated work and notice how information about the characters, setting, or mood is communicated visually. Similarly, before creating a short animation of their own, writers might consider how to visually convey information about setting or how to sequence events. Whether students and their teachers are engaging in close reading or creative composition with digital texts, knowing how visual elements work can give them powerful tools for capturing stories in motion.

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Appendix A
Sample Images from Student's Creative Projects

Appendix B
Visual Elements Used in Visual Analysis

Appendix C
Visual Elements Used to Explain Their Own Design Choices