

# Be Not Afraid: Connecting Visual Principles And Emotions

Cristine G. Goldberg Danilo M. Baylen

## Abstract

This article identifies and presents an overview of the connections between Bang's visual principles and human emotions. It describes a hands-on activity that engages participants to apply these principles. It identifies thematic patterns of lessons learned from analysis of reflections of past participants. Finally, it discusses implications to teaching and learning in K-12 classrooms.

## Introduction

Bang (2000) wrote, "We see shapes in context, and our reactions to them depend in large part on that context" (p. 8). By changing the shape, color, size, or placement of objects on a piece of paper or computer screen, we create an image that generates reaction from those who are looking or watching. This reaction, which many commonly refer to as emotion, has links to how individuals see pictures or perceived things (Arzipe, 2003; Seppanen, 2006). This is an important connection for K-12 students to learn. It is because "we see pictures as extensions of the real world" (p. 41).

The first part of this article presents the ideas of Molly Bang about the power of perception elicited when humans view pictures. Based on these ideas, she developed statements about ten (10) visual principles and provided the authors a foundation for a hands-on classroom activity in the creation of a scary picture as well as a subsequent assignment named Scary ABCs.

The second part of this article focuses on the actual activity that was completed by our students as part of a children's literature course where visual aspects are important in our assignments. The process for this particular project is described thoroughly so that others in the field may replicate the activity readily. That activity of making a scary picture helps to take the abstract concepts into the practical realm. As instructors of educators, we were cognizant of our students' needs and designed a lesson that clearly illustrates these concepts.

The third part of this article discusses what our students gained from this activity. Their examinations about the activity were at a high level of self reflection. The reflections shared by our students helped us to refine future implementation of this activity.

Implications, both specific and general, for practitioners in the field are presented as areas for further exploration and thought. It is a concern of the authors that K-12 teachers are exposed to various aspects of visual literacy and that these experiences provide teachers opportunities to transfer knowledge gained from their courses into the K-12 classroom.

## Bang's Visual Principles Through Self Study

In Bang's book, *Picture this: How pictures work* (2000), she describes thoroughly the process used with the placement of pieces of paper to gain a better understanding of constructing illustrations. It was the physical manipulation of lines, shapes, color and their relationships that provided her with what we commonly call the "aha" moment. Through the manipulation of cut abstract shapes, Bang investigated how the structures built from those shapes were instrumental in eliciting emotional reactions about a picture. Her explorations during this self study resulted in the general principles that are presented in the following brief overview.

## Visual Principles Overview

It is recommended that the reader have a copy of Bang's book so that each principle is shown clearly while reading them. Please note that Bang stressed that there was no hierarchical order to the principles as all are equally important.

- Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm (p. 42).
- Vertical shapes are more exciting and more active (pp. 44-45).
- Diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension (pp. 46-53).
- The upper half of a picture is a place of freedom, happiness, and triumph. The bottom half of a picture feels more threatening, heavier, sadder, or constrained (pp. 54-62).
- The center of the page is the most effective "center of attention." The edges and corners of the picture are the edges and corners of the picture-worlds (pp. 62-67).
- White or light backgrounds feel safer to us than dark backgrounds (pp. 68-69).
- We are more scared when looking at pointed shapes. Rounded shapes or curves make us feel more secure (pp. 70-71).
- The larger an object is in a picture, the stronger it feels. The effect of color is perhaps the strongest of the picture elements (pp. 72-75).

- We associate the same or similar colors much more strongly than the same or similar shapes (pp. 76-79).
- Contrast enables us to see. It is the contrast that allows us to see both patterns and elements (pp. 80-91).

### A Scary Activity Takes Place

When students are presented with various visual literacy elements, they are often overloaded with the theoretical and/or abstract concepts (Gangwer, 2009). Education majors and classroom teachers already have a myriad of standards to meet in creating lessons and units taught, so the mandate to do more in a lesson can be daunting. An activity such as this one offers students an opportunity to examine ways that cross-curricular opportunities may be incorporated into a lesson (see Applications in Classrooms section). This method of presenting Bang's principles has been utilized with both undergraduate and graduate students. Our past experience in implementing a similar activity with a diverse K-12 student population, inform us that this is an excellent way to teach Bang's principles. Please note that although a general time frame for each part of the activity is given, in reality the time frame is audience dependent.

### Beginning The Conversation

In general we begin the conversation by putting the idea of what is scary up for discussion. If possible, it is a good hook if you can darken the room and begin with the old, "It was a dark, dark night," story. No matter the age, it always gains student attention. The concept of scary (fear) is something that children find fascinating. After the beginning hook, the discussion moves to what makes something scary to us. The instructor may write some of these down for students to see. Next, we ask some of these questions to move the discussion forward:

- How does the scary thought or thing work to scare us?
- Why are we scared?
- What factors are at play that causes us to be scared?

This general discussion will most likely take from seven to ten minutes.

### Clarifying The Scary Elements

The next step is to introduce the thought of "is there a difference in what a child says is scary and what an adult says is scary?" The reason this is important is because we shed a lot of our childhood fears as we grow into adulthood, and it is necessary for students to think back about the types of things that scared them when they were young. The

instructor may underscore or check off those things on the board that are being mentioned that are the same as the prior discussion and add more to the list if they are not already present. This part of the activity will take approximately three to five minutes.

### Visual Or Thought?

At this point the instructor will ask if there is a difference in what is visually scary compared to the non-visual (thought). Students will look at what is already on the board and discuss a few of them. Three minutes is an approximate time frame for this segment.

### Scary Snake Concept

Next, the concept of a scary snake is introduced. The students are usually asked to take a look at a snake. A picture or drawing of a snake is put before the students and the following question is proposed. What is it about this snake that is scary? A snake was chosen because it almost always is on the list constructed in the prior sections described above. Three minutes is a time frame that can be expected.

Figure 1  
An Example Of A Snake Construction  
(Photo taken at workshop by the author)



### Constructing The Snakes

When the students have discussed the scary snake issue thoroughly, it is time to begin the construction of individual scary snakes. Students are provided with a wide range of colored construction paper, glue

and a few markers. Students are instructed to just tear the paper into shape. Students may be provided with scissors. However, the authors have noticed that when the students have to tear the paper, they become more involved with the process (Figure 1). Seven to eight minutes is usually sufficient for this part of the activity.

Student creations are then examined and, in general, the student will hold up his/her creation for classmates to view. If it will facilitate the discussion, the instructor may bring the student work to the front of the class for better viewing by all. The instructor draws attention to visual elements that produce an emotional response. There may be some things you will notice in the constructions of the students that will connect Bang's principles to the scary snake (Figure 2). These can either be brought in at this time or the instructor may choose to wait and refer back to the particular pictures as he/she covers the principles. This discussion of the student made snakes will normally take between seven and ten minutes.

Figure 2  
Example Of Diagonal, Color And Contrast Displayed  
(Photo taken at workshop by the author)



#### Moving From The Snakes To Bang's Principles

At this point in the lesson, Bang's principles are discussed. For each principle two or three examples are displayed for students to view. How the principles work in each example is discussed before moving on to the next principle. The examples are a mix of prior student work, photographs, and illustrations from books. By providing a mix of examples, the students are able to transfer the material presented to their own situations with relative ease.

As the presentation of the principles moves along, we frequently notice that students begin looking at their own snake creations. After all of the principles are presented, students are then asked to ponder over their own snake creations. We ask, "How might you make your own snake more scary?" Students usually

respond quickly with ideas as to how they would either reconstruct their snake or how they would make a new one. The relative ease that students display when asked for this constructive criticism, verifies that the students have internalized the principles presented to them.

#### The Scary ABCs Assignment

At the end of the snake activity, students are assigned the task that has been named the "Scary ABCs." Students were given the task of using a beginning letter from one of their names (first, middle or last) to make a scary picture that utilized the principles discussed during our lesson and scary snake activity. Students could either utilize real construction paper or the drawing utility in Microsoft Word. Then students were instructed to scan or make a digital photo of their scary picture. Included in the initial description of the assignment was to choose a bird, a snake, a shark, or other forms that are commonly scary to many of us as a part of the implementation.

The second part of the assignment was to complete a reflection paper. The instructions were to write a reflection on what the student was trying to do with the scary picture, how it does and doesn't work and why. Students were to think about how they incorporated the principles from Bang's book. Possible questions were:

- What are the challenges in making a picture this way?
- Which principles did they utilize as they went about the process?
- How did they make decisions about the actual construction?

Finally, the students were to address the question of what they had learned from the experience not only from the theoretical side but also about themselves as a learner. Students were encouraged to include what types of applications this activity might inspire in their own classrooms.

#### Reflections Of Students On The Scary ABCs

Posted in the sections below are comments made about the assignment by three students. Most comments from all of the implementations of this activity are very similar to what are included here.

#### General Comments

General comments included the length of time actually needed to complete the assignment, a greater understanding of what really goes into making an illustration for publication, the decisions involved in that process and a growth in appreciation for the art of illustrating. Comments about the process that we found interesting:

*This assignment, I assumed, was going to be fairly easy. I love to draw and play on the computer. I first began working on a snake. I played with it for hours, manipulating shapes and nothing seemed to create the piece that I envisioned. I then thought to myself, what else scares me? That was easy, a spider. So I looked at pictures of spiders on the internet until I found one that made me feel uncomfortable. I took the stance of the spider from that picture and began to create the spider. (Student A)*

*I guess I never really thought about the amount of attention that needs to go into the details of a drawing or painting, especially those that are found within children's literature. I know that the next time my eye gazes upon some ghastly illustration or uplifting picture, I will have more of an appreciation for the mechanics and effort behind such pieces of art. (Student B)*

*This assignment has been my favorite one so far. Even the text for this assignment was interesting (maybe because it was so easy and short to read). (Student C)*

The comment from Student C about being a favorite assignment was repeated by more than fifty percent (50%) of our students.

#### Decisions And Difficulties

Some problems for students were how to achieve the effect they desired, what figure they would choose to convey the scary factor, and how much time they invested in their work. Types of challenges faced by students:

*What does not work in this picture is the space. I wanted to place this scene within another scene to make the spider seem larger than life. I put in branches and then took them out. Due to the fact that the spider was so large, when I added the branches it just brought up questions to the people I showed it to. I also had to lighten the entire scene because it was at one point so dark that the spider's prey was invisible. I find it less threatening now that the background is lighter, but the picture as a whole does make more sense. (Student A)*

*One of the main challenges that I faced in completing this assignment was choosing the subject for my picture. I thought long and hard before I finally came up with my pterodactyl / bird hybrid which I felt would haunt the nightmare of anyone and everyone that was subjugated to my illustration. (Student B)*

*The hardest part was deciding which animal to do. Ironically, my inspiration came from one of my daughter's most adorable color pages. Once I knew what animal I wanted to do, I started cutting. .... The hard part was getting the right size. I had a hard time getting the correct proportions. I kind of cheated. I made a simple outline of an owl and took it from there. This made it so much easier. (Student C)*

#### Applications In Classrooms

It was in the applications for their own classrooms discussion that it became apparent our students were thinking about cross-curricular connections and not just an art connection (Moline, 1995). Comments about possible applications:

*I think this would be a fun and exciting way for students to express themselves. I could ask them to create this drawing based on stories we read in class. I can incorporate geometry, literature, and art in one project. It can also be used to provide an assessment for my student's comprehension. The best part about it is that this project is fun, creative and makes the learner think. This is great to tap into student's multiple intelligences. (Student A)*

*This activity also has a wide variety of applications in my future classrooms. For instance, students can simply create a scary picture of their own by simply following a few of the guideline found in Ms. Bang's Picture This. Students can even create a picture book or portfolio of their own composed of these types of scary pictures which they can bring home or even share on the Internet for all of their friends and family to enjoy. (Student B)*

*In the classroom, this activity can be used for several reasons. First of all, it is something that students will enjoy doing. They use their imagination and creativity. It's a good way to incorporate art and content material. The creation of a picture could be used to retell a story or scene from a book. It could be used to depict an idea or feeling. In turn, this could be used as an assessment tool. (Student C)*

#### Learning About Ourselves

Any activity or assignment that produces clear thinking on the part of our students is always a consideration in the refinement of what remains or is tweaked for improvement in a course. When learning about themselves, student statements that directly apply to the activity are a positive factor that plays a role in our own course evaluation. Student comments about their own learning:

*I learned not to assume anything about a project. This assignment took time and I had to think about what I was doing. I also learned how the simplest shapes can create feelings in the viewer. Colors, direction, and size can alter those feelings. I did not realize all that I had learned while making this. I was drawn into the picture and wanted to spend time working on it.* (Student A)

*From this experience, I have learned a great deal about myself as a learner. I learned that I follow directions quite well and can easily pick up on ideas and concepts if they are laid out for me in such a logical and conclusive format. I have also learned that having concrete examples and detailed illustrations also help me a great deal in allowing me to pick up the main idea of what is being taught.* (Student B)

*More importantly, I saw how simple, small details, such as color and placement, affect the mood of pictures. This is .... another assignment that should make all of us see the importance and impact of pictures.* (Student C)

### **Implications**

Implications for teaching and learning in K-12 situations are drawn from students' comments. Based upon those comments, many of our students discovered that cross-curricular opportunities existed (Gangwer, 2009). Because of cross-curricular connections, there is the likelihood that completion of this activity may lead to more implementation of a similar activity in our students' own classrooms.

We also realized that this activity produced a high level of self reflection. Although it stretched the skill level of many either creating by hand or by utilizing the computer drawing program, students appear to have been highly engaged with their interpretations of Bang's principles. It was clear that an assignment that challenges is accepted well despite difficulties.

### **Final Considerations**

In conclusion, the rewards of implementing this particular activity with undergraduate and graduate students in the field of education are evident as our students work with their own classes of students in the examination of pictures, picture books, and photographs. A teacher's ability to understand what principles are in play ultimately allows him/her to explain more fully to his/her own students how a picture works. Rather than a cursory explanation, a working knowledge of Bang's principles gives a teacher the confidence level that what is being said about a picture is based upon Bang's explorations

and his/her own conclusions upon completion of the described activity.

The positive experience gained through the implementations of this activity, has motivated the authors to add more visual literacy activities in other courses that they teach.

### **References**

- Arzipe, E. (2003). *Children reading pictures: Interpreting visual texts*. London: RoutledgeFarmer.
- Bang, M. (2000). *Picture this: How pictures work*. San Francisco: SeaStar Books.
- Gangwer, T. (2009). *Visual impact, visual teaching: Using images to strengthen learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Moline, S. (1995). *I see what you mean: Children at work with visual information*. Portlane, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Seppanen, J. (2006). *The power of the gaze: An introduction to visual literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.