Enhancing Literacy Instruction Through Infographics
BY MARK J. DAVIS
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Two years ago, my colleague and I wrote a Reading Today article about the emergence of infographics for literacy instruction. The feedback has continued to demonstrate the passion educators and students have for visualization in the literacy process. In Stephen Apkon’s book, The Age of the Image: Redefining Literacy in a World of Screens, he laments that we spend more time teaching letters and words than imagery. With infographics, I hope that literacy educators can envision a synergy of both tasks.

An infographic is an illustration that uses words and pictures with visualizations that may include graphs, charts, and tables. Infographics are used predominantly as a text feature in journalism and textbooks. In the past decade, they have been used frequently to analyze and display information on news broadcasts, social media, and advertising. Readers of infographics must be able to decode the symbols and comprehend the language of imagery. As contemporary learners continue to connect to iconography and visual data in our daily lives, making sense of and creating infographics will become an essential skill.

Why it matters
Most educators think of literacy skills in traditional syntactic fashion, meaning that students need support in letter–sound relationships, vocabulary, and decoding. Each skill is critical for literacy proficiency, yet we consider visual symbols to be text features. I believe we are on the brink of accepting information and data visualization, illustrated in infographics, as an essential language of proficient readers and writers.

Through my presentations and writings, I am encouraging educators to explore infographic design beyond traditional graphic organizers and text feature study. Students creating written products of their learning have a powerful medium in infographics. The author’s purpose, genre of writing, and grammar are displayed abundantly in both the written text and the illustrated text. By uncovering the parallels for students, we open opportunities to examine close reading of visual images as part of text. Multiple perspectives are encouraged, hyperlinks and dynamic controls allow interaction, and multimedia is integrated to activate other senses. Through social media, infographics can be shared across cultural lines to spark global feedback.

I often see lessons designed around the close reading strategies recommended in the Common Core State Standards. Close reading relies on the three key shifts of the Common Core: text complexity, evidence-based responses, and content-rich nonfiction readings. Infographics offer complexity through multiple images, words, and graphs while conveying a message. Students use infographics to collect or parse evidence while reading text. Most infographics follow informational or argumentative genres of writing using the language of content area subjects. The design features of infographics are listed as critical tools for supporting specific ELA/Literacy standards at all levels (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI-7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST-8.2.A).
Getting started

The best way to understand visual literacy with infographics is to examine and create your own. Spend time examining infographic elements with your students using samples from Daily Infographic. You can easily sort by subject and see different styles and levels of complexity. Ask your students to identify the following:

- What is the specific topic of the infographic?
- What is the author’s purpose?
- How does the author demonstrate authority or knowledge of the subject?
- How do specific visual elements support understanding or analysis?
- If you could improve this infographic, what might you illustrate differently?

As students begin to recognize common similarities of infographics, chart their findings in visible space (on the board or a web document). Ask your students to sketch ideas for a topic that you are exploring as a class. By working on a single topic, perhaps in dyads or triads, the students can bring unique perspectives and ways for delivering a message about the topic. Students can then conduct a search for infographics that align closely with your topic. You might suggest that your students write a short response to the inquiry questions mentioned above and share in a public document. You can expect a rich discussion to follow your review of their findings.

For more advanced practice, have your students sign up for a free account on Infogr.am or PiktoChart. Using their video tutorials, students can learn the basics of the intuitive interface and see models of completed projects. You could ask your students to use one of these tools to translate some of their sketches generated around your class topic into an infographic. Remind students that like good writing and presentations, it is not about bulky text and flashy looks, but a concise and engaging message. If they want to enhance their project, they should consider using dynamic features such as data filtering or multimedia integration.

Literacy educators have a critical role to play in the instruction of infographics. Graphic designers and artists have a vast knowledge of illustration, but literacy instruction can complement their meaning. Today’s reader is exposed to new literacies through hyperlinking and multimedia. Infographics enhance our understanding of complex data and illustrates narratives in a dynamic fashion. We may not all be great artists, but we can be exceptional readers.

Mark J. Davis is a third-year doctoral candidate in the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College doctoral program in education. He is a full-time reading specialist at Barrington
High School in Rhode Island and active collaborator in educational media design. Additional resources are available on his website and on Twitter.

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