Inventory of multimodal skills that TV draws on:
- **Visual:** camera shots, camera angles, character positions, settings, clothes, title, credits, makeup, costumes, objects or artifacts used
- **Oral:** music, dialogue, sounds, voices Written: text scrolling on screen during news programs, close captions, sports text, subtitles
- **Movement:** character positioning and actions, icons moving on screen
- **Tactile:** identifying elements of shows; e.g., *Dora the Explorer* or even blooper shows
- **Dimensions:** animation, using camera shots and technology

The Language of TV

Television shows are dependent on a combination of spoken language—sometimes written language—with visual images. In analyzing the language used in TV shows, we need to take account of visual components. Visuals and language work together in the grammar of visual design (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) of shows. Television is particularly complicated because visuals and language/dialogue are combined with sound—they are multimodal texts that feed into students' innate *synaesthetic* understanding. Television scripts therefore need to take equal account of words, pictures, and sounds.

Grammar

There is a hidden grammar to television production, which is a bit like a grammar in language, based on camera angles that are used to create mood (Marshall & Werndly, 2002):

- **Close-ups** are frequently used in soap opera scenes, because they communicate relationships between people and are a cue to concentrate on emotions and feelings of characters. Dramas also use close-up shots to show intimacy or feelings.
- **Long shots** are used in action films and action-packed cartoons, where spectacles and visual effects are emphasized.
- A shot taken at **eye level** emphasizes a character's power, because our perspective is as if we are looking up at them.

Situated Practice Activity

Scooby and the Gang

Scooby Doo has withstood the test of time.

- Ask students who love Scooby and are struggling with literacy to think about characterization in a Scooby storyline.
- To illustrate what it means to analyze characters and their dispositions in texts, ask students to study in-depth character traits in a *Scooby Doo* episode for homework.
- Use multiple types of texts by having students read one of the many Scooby Doo books and watch an episode of Scooby Doo.
- Ask students to write a character profile of each character: Velma, Fred, Scooby, Shaggy, and Daphne. Then ask them to take on one of the Scooby Doo personas. Have students pair up: one student is an interviewer and the other is a character of their choice. Interviewers need to develop questions and then conduct an interview with the character about why they made certain decisions or actions in an episode or book.

Televisual Conventions

Connotation is about how words or images or sounds have specific meanings and associations within our culture (Marshall & Werndly, 2003, p.30). Connotation grows out of our cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values, and it informs the way in which we understand moving images. Connotation can carry positive and negative signs that aid us and our students in interpreting television. Television shows play on connotations to guide our interpretations of the plot—they play on our ideals and our feelings and our values as watchers.

Just as fictional works use symbolism and metaphors, so too does television carry ideologies to transmit messages. The image of darkness falling upon a room can foreshadow something ominous in a mystery or detective story. The symbol of a rose in a drama can betoken love. Metaphorical language is as pervasive in TV as it is in printed literature, and our students' capacity to spot symbolism and metaphors is a skill we want to evoke in their language work. One frequently sees symbols and metaphors used in documentaries to unite the narrative. For example, in a documentary about women and the Taliban, a *hijab* can serve as a symbol transmitting a message. Many shots, speeches, scenes, and narratives in TV shows are metaphorical, in that they represent one thing in detail or a multiplicity of things. We see this particularly in advertising, where an object is the key feature of a narrative. Music and sounds can evoke emotions and set the tone for a scene. Television advertising often uses visual images and music to send a specific message.

Storyboards are often used by producers to lay out stories and to analyze openers, music, dialogues, character positions. Storyboards give directors thumbnail sketches of what will happen in each sequence and if the story works together.

Overt Instruction Practice

Spot the TV Genre

Create a series of openers for different genres of TV shows:

- Sitcom begins with a conflict between characters over a broken object
- Soap opera starts with a private conversation about someone who suddenly walks in
- Reality show revisits a scene from the following week and characters discuss the outcome
- Detective show begins with a murder in someone's home with the door open at midday
- Drama begins with feuding housewives
- Cartoon about a sponge who decides to help his boss meet a partner in life
- Quiz show begins with the introduction of contestants

Once you have given different groups their TV opener, they need to develop a conflict and a resolution to fulfill the narrative. To reflect on the process, ask them how the narratives might be different if they were in another genre, such as fiction or a video game.

Teaching Strategy

Smart TV Viewing

1. Develop assignments that review critical TV viewing of shows of your choice (i.e., shows that you feel will teach students something).

2. Ask students to relate their readings to a character on television.

3. Encourage parents to watch TV with their children and discuss what happened.

4. To develop more discerning TV viewers, discuss different shows and why some are better than others (the way you would suggest certain books over others).

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TV Portfolio

Have your students create a portfolio of their TV watching. They can organize their portfolio however they like, for example:

- **Favorite Genre:** TV show with a description.
- **Favorite Character:** Why they like them.
- **Favorite Theme of Show:** Talk about a particular episode
- **Favorite Setting:** Talk about the context of a show and why you like it.

Once they have compiled their categories and support materials, they can present them to the class.

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