

Creating an Icon

Grade Levels: 4th – 8th

Time Requirement: Approximately 30 minutes to prepare and 90 minutes to complete.

Objectives:

The student will:

- Learn how to communicate visually

Activity Summary:

Students will gain understanding of what an icon is, how it came about, and how it has transformed the way humans interact with computers. They will then have the opportunity to create their own custom icons and give rationale for their designs.

New Mexico Standards:

NM Standards: Modern, Classical, and Native Languages Content Standards 2.1, 4.2, 6.2, 7.1

NM Standards: Arts Content Standards 4, 5 and 7

Materials:

Chart paper and pens, student worksheet, colored pencils and drawing paper.

Background Information:

During the 1980's, the Graphical User Interface (GUI) was introduced and it quickly changed the way people interacted with personal computers. Today, most people are familiar with the GUI and its collection of symbols or icons that represent computer commands. Examples of typical computer "desktop" icons include the "Recycle Bin" and "My Documents." "Toolbars," or sets of icons within applications, feature common application commands such as "Save," "Copy," and "Paste." Software developers are constantly looking for ways to improve the design of icons to make them more intuitive to users.

Procedures:

1. **Prepare** a list of icons and symbols to direct student discussion and exploration in preparation for the activity (icons related to a computer environment like My Computer, My Documents, etc. and icons related to the human environment like a stoplight, the American flag, and a wedding ring).
2. **What are icons?** As a class, discuss how people communicate something visually, or without words. What are some examples of this? What icons do we see everyday that communicate something without words (non-verbally)? Brainstorm and list on chart paper.
3. **Icons on computers.** Graphic designer Susan Kare developed icons for both the Macintosh and Windows. Among many others, Kare created the Mac trashcan icon (for disposing of files), and the moving watch (to indicate that the computer was busy). What are some other icons can you find on your computer desktop?
4. **What makes a good icon?** Brainstorm the qualities that make a good icon – e.g., it's simple or easy to remember. Susan Kare said that "I believe that good icons are more akin to road signs rather than illustrations, and ideally should present an idea in a clear, concise, and memorable way." (www.designboom.com)
5. Students **create their own icon** or image that communicates something visually or symbolically. They then write a detailed description of the meaning of the icon and the rationale for its design. They may create an icon that reflects an activity or verb related to their daily lives (e.g., an icon for lunch, an icon for carpool, an icon for homework).
6. In small groups, **students share icons.** Can students' guess the meaning of other students' icons? What were the clues used? Students discuss their development process and thinking.
7. **Regroup** and review as a whole class (students view each others creations). Are there similar ones? What icons are recognizable without explanation?

Vocabulary:

Icon

Noun

Verb

Adjective

Extensions:

1. Students make more detailed illustrations of their icons and mount an exhibition in the classroom that features their icons, descriptive writing about their rationale, and the process behind the icons development (see student worksheet).
2. Students create their own personal icon or symbol. This image represents themselves and their experience. Students may wish to create a shield or mandala that expresses different aspects of their lives.
3. This activity could be folded into a unit exploring the origins of language. Cuneiform, the oldest or earliest known form of written expression used pictorial representation as a way to express meaning. Students create their own symbols or icons to express a message pictorially.

Modifications:

Rather than asking students to come with their own sources for developing icons, assign students a particular noun or verb for which to create an icon. Then compare students' versions. Are there similar icons? What were students thinking in the development process?

Assessment:

- Observation of students' comments and participation in class discussion
- Observation of students' interactions in small groups
- Evaluation of icons created and students' rationale

References:

www.kare.com - homepage of Susan Kare with images of the icons she has developed.

Creating an Icon – Worksheet

Directions:

In the box below, illustrate an icon that reflects an activity or verb related to your daily life (e.g., playing soccer, watching television). Then, in the space provided, explain the rationale behind the design.


