Learning to look critically: teaching and learning visual literacy in art and design librarianship

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Teaching and learning visual literacy within art and design librarianship presents several unique challenges. Librarians are better equipped than ever to meet these challenges with the help of *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards* and the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education,* which provides an exciting opportunity to situate visual literacy within the contextual definition of information literacy for art and design students. In mapping these two documents together the author found several ways to address the more critical components of information and visual literacy in more nuanced and meaningful ways. While art librarians have often addressed visual literacy needs to varying degrees and in creative and practical ways, a more systematic approach is needed as we move forward.

Introduction

Seeing is automatic, but critically looking and reflecting on images and visual media takes effort, skills and practice. Images often represent knowledge in increasingly more disciplines and throughout academia (graphs, charts, etc.), but the notion of images as an expression of knowledge has historically been accepted in artistic and design-related disciplines. Through studying the elements and principles of art and design, artists and designers learn the basic building blocks of their visual practice, but art librarians who work with art and design students, artists, and curators may not fully grasp their unique information needs if they are not equipped with the same habits of mind and ability to teach visual literacy skills.

It was once argued that visual literacy instruction falls outside of the scope of library instruction.[1] This has potentially led to the marginalization of visual literacy within academic libraries but has allowed librarians to focus on information literacy, primarily text-based information, and carve out a place for teaching librarians in the changing landscape of higher education. With significant changes in higher education, technology, and visual culture visual literacy has been reconsidered as a key facet of metaliteracy, a term which calls attention to the limiting nature of traditional information literacy definitions.[2] Visual literacy has often been named a critical skill for any 21st century learner.[3] Several recent publications have also emphasized the role of academic libraries in teaching visual literacy alongside information literacy, across disciplines.[4] The critical thinking and communication skills that are associated with visual literacy have helped build this case in recent years, which has led to a call for librarians to share successes in visual literacy instruction, strategies, collaboration models, and professional development opportunities. Denise Hattwig has stated that 'while library instruction in image search and retrieval, evaluation, and use has grown more commonplace, the role of libraries in supporting other visual literacy skills such as image interpretation and creation is less widely accepted.'[5] Art librarians are in a unique position to effectively design, implement and assess visual literacy instruction and it is imperative that these efforts are shared across disciplines and institutions. This article explores the ways in which art library instruction can systematically and thoroughly address visual literacy needs within academic institutions.

1. Nelson, Nerissa. "Visual Literacy and Library Instruction: A Critical Analysis." Education Libraries 27, no. 1 (June 1, 2004): 8.

2. Mackey, Thomas P., and Trudi E. Jacobson. "Reframing Information Literacy as a Metaliteracy." *College & Research Libraries* 72, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 65. doi:10.5860/crl-76r1.

3. Little, Deandra, Peter Felten, and Chad Berry. "Liberal Education in a Visual World." *Liberal Education* 96, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 46.

Beatty, Nicole A. "Cognitive Visual Literacy: From Theories and Competencies to Pedagogy." *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 32, no. 1 (2013): 33. doi:10.1086/669987.

Hattwig, Denise, Kaila Bussert, Ann Medaille, and Joanna Burgess. "Visual Literacy Standards in Higher Education: New Opportunities for Libraries and Student Learning." *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 13, no. 1 (2013): 62. doi:10.1353/pla.2013.0008.

"Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills: Definitions." *Institute of Museum and Library Services*, July 24, 2015. https://www.imls.gov/impact-imls/national-initiatives/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills/

At the intersection of visual and information literacy

In 2011 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) approved the *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Visual Literacy Standards). The Visual Literacy Standards were informed by the *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Information Literacy Standards) and were meant to complement these standards, while also addressing unique aspects of visual literacy. Definitions of visual literacy have evolved and changed over time, as with information literacy. The newest definitions include an interdisciplinary or transliterate approach to visual literacy.[6] ACRL defines visual literacy as:

> A set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture.[7]

The seven Visual Literacy Standards follow the same model and lists similar learning outcomes provided by the now rescinded Information Literacy Standards. The Visual Literacy Standards list these main areas as competencies: Defining image needs, finding images, interpreting and analyzing images, evaluating images, using images effectively, creating visual media, and using images ethically and citing visuals. For a visual representation of the Visual Literacy Standards, see figure 1.

While the Visual Literacy Standards were still under development, Benjamin Harris aligned visual literacy with the Information Literacy Competency standards in 2010, which revealed connections and opportunities for practical integration during library and classroom instruction across disciplines.[8] Others have since noted the 'parallels between visual literacy skills and the critical thinking skills required of information literacy, and have shown how the Information Literacy Standards can be applied to the tasks of researching and understanding visual materials.'[9] With the creation of these standards academic librarians have begun to consider creative and practical ways to address information literacy at their institutions.[10]

In February 2015 ACRL released the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Framework for Information Literacy), which moved the profession towards a more conceptual and flexible model or definition of information literacy. The Framework for Information Literacy provided an exciting opportunity to situate visual literacy within the contextual definition of information literacy for art and design students.

At the time of the release, there were no clear mappings between the Framework for Information Literacy and the Visual Literacy Standards. By December 2015 the author completed an extensive map between these two professional documents, linking all knowledge practices (Framework for Information Literacy) to all learning outcomes (Visual Literacy Standards) and adding on to the work of Amanda Hovious who had previously mapped to the Information Literacy Standards.[11] This document was designed to assist in the development of instructional objectives and assessment, identify key knowledge practices for art and design students, and investigate the possibility of developing new knowledge practices that are more targeted to those students. The unique habits of mind within the art and design disciplines are not bounded by these two professional documents by any means, but the combination has made it easier to see clear connections to specific assignments or courses related to the visual arts or design disciplines and has helped align librarian goals with faculty goals. In addition, this document and reflective exercise expanded the author's understanding of the new Framework for Information Literacy and provided an opportunity to think critically about The Visual Literacy Standards and where they fit into library instruction, particularly on a curricular level.

It was noted, upon analyzing the connections between the Framework for Information Literacy and the Visual Literacy Standards, that the critical and reflective aspects of art and design could be emphasized more during library instruction through the inclusion of visual literacy. Also, given that it is more readily accepted within creative fields that learning is experiential and meaning is socially constructed or contextually derived based on worldview and experiences of the viewer(s). This opens up pedagogical practices that may be more

museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills-definitions.

Schwartz, Judith. "Visual Literacy Meets Information Literacy," (Metropolitan New York Library Council, 2015) 2.

4. Brown, Jeanne. "The Visual Learner and Information Literacy: Generating Instruction Strategies for Design Students," 2002. http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=lib_articles.

Milbourn, Amanda. "A Big Picture Approach: Using Embedded Librarianship to Proactively Address the Need for Visual Literacy Instruction in Higher Education." *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 32, no. 2 (2013): 274-283. doi:10.1086/673517.

Schwartz, "Visual Literacy Meets Information Literacy."

5. Hattwig et al., "Visual Literacy Standards in Higher Education: New Opportunities for Libraries and Student Learning," 66.

6. Ibid., 63.

7. "ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education." Text. *Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)*, October 27, 2011. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy.

8. Harris, Benjamin R. "Blurring Borders, Visualizing Connections: Aligning Information and Visual Literacy Learning Outcomes." *Reference Services Review* 38, no. 4 (November 2010): 523–35.

9. Hattwig et al., "Visual Literacy Standards in Higher Education: New Opportunities for Libraries and Student Learning," 66.

10. Milbourn, "A Big Picture Approach: Using Embedded Librarianship to Proactively Address the Need for Visual Literacy Instruction in Higher Education," 277.

11. Meeks, Amanda. "Alignment Charts for ACRL Information Literacy Framework, Information Literacy Standards, and Visual Literacy Standards." *Google Docs*, 2015. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1w3AX1-XRYBla6gxxoTFSoLY9cp3pr4yD85ON0-qlq34/edit?usp=sharing
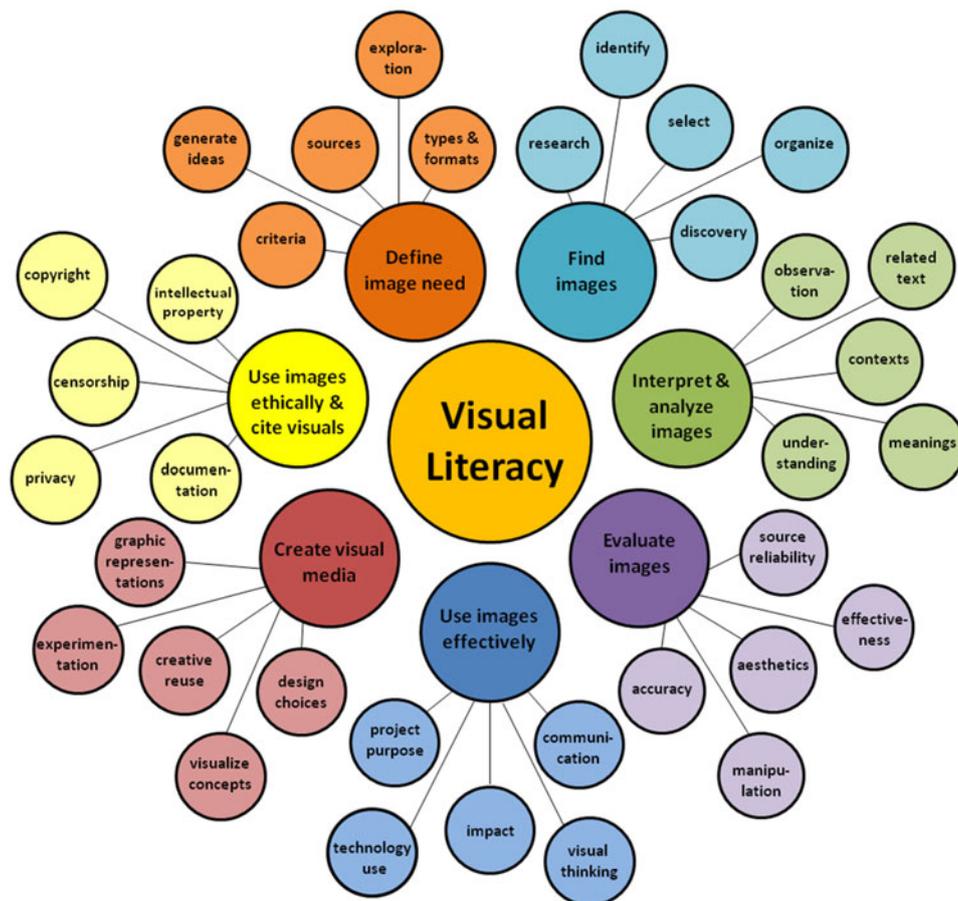
Fig. 1. Visual Literacy Array based on ACRL's Visual Literacy Standards by D. Hattwig, K. Bussert, and A. Medaille. Copyright 2013 The Johns Hopkins University Press. This image first appeared in *PORTAL: LIBRARIES AND THE ACADEMY*, Volume 13, Issue 1, January 2013, p. 75.

challenging when dealing only with text-based information. The inclusion visual literacy within the Framework for Information Literacy more readily addresses the cultural, historical, and social contexts of information and allows for reflection on the larger social, economical, and political issues during library instruction.

An example will help illustrate this point more accurately. The portion of the map in Figure 2 shows one of the knowledge practices from the Framework for Information Literacy's threshold concept *Information Has Value* as it relates to both the Information Literacy Standards and the Visual Literacy Standards. The visual literacy outcomes on the right of the chart provide concrete ways of looking and analyzing images that can address the how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate visual information.[12] The link between the standards and the framework sparks a more nuanced way of understanding both and has helped write learning objectives and sparked ideas for class activities that had not been as obvious previously.

Artists and designers are contributors to visual culture and the information landscape. Both the Framework for Information Literacy and the Visual Literacy Standards put a stronger emphasis on information creation (or information design) than the previous Information Literacy Standards did. Information design has a strong role in media production, visual culture and a unique ability to tell stories. Visual presentation and communication of ideas is not limited to the art and design disciplines, and all disciplines can benefit from practicing and developing analytical and creative thinking skills through image production.[13] Figure 3 shows one of the sections of the framework and standards map that highlights the more critical components of image and information creation. Opening up discussions and providing learning opportunities around the more critical

12. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." *Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)*, February 9, 2015. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

13. Hattwig et al., "Visual Literacy Standards in Higher Education: New Opportunities for Libraries and Student Learning," 81.

Information Has Value Knowledge Practice	Info Literacy Standards	Visual Literacy Standards
Understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information;	5.1.c Identifies and discusses issues related to censorship and freedom of speech 5.2.g Demonstrates an understanding of institutional policies related to human subjects research	3.2.a. Describes cultural and historical factors relevant to the production of an image (e.g., time period, geography, economic conditions, political structures, social practices) 3.2.e. Explores representations of gender, ethnicity, and other cultural or social identifiers in images 7.1.e. Explores issues surrounding image censorship

Fig. 2. Detail of Alignment charts for ACRL Information Literacy Framework, Information Literacy Standards, and Visual Literacy Standards by Amanda Meeks. 2015.

components of visual literacy encourages agency within the learners, so library instruction can move beyond what will earn an "A" or secure a job in the future.

The Information Literacy Framework highlights the changing pedagogical role for teaching librarians and allows for more creativity in applying other disciplinary knowledge to make library instruction relevant for 21st century learners. Barbara Blummer compiled a literature review that covered academic institutions' efforts to foster visual literacy from 1999 to 2015; she concluded that there was no unified approach to teaching visual literacy in the academic institutional setting and many of the examples she found were outside of the United States.[14] Just like information literacy instruction, visual literacy instruction must be intentional, iterative, and assessed appropriately in order to be effective in teaching and learning environments.

14. Blummer, Barbara. "Some Visual Literacy Initiatives in Academic Institutions: A Literature Review from 1999 to the Present." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 34, no. 1 (January 2015): 22. doi:10.1080/23796529.2015.11674721.

Scholarship as a Conversation Knowledge Practice	Info Literacy Standards	Visual Literacy Standards
contribute to scholarly conversation at an appropriate level, such as local online community, guided discussion, undergraduate research journal, conference presentation/poster session;	3.6.a Participates in classroom and other discussions 3.6.b Participates in class-sponsored electronic communication forums designed to encourage discourse on the topic (e.g., email, bulletin boards, chat rooms)	5.4.b. Presents images effectively, considering meaning, aesthetic criteria, visual impact, rhetorical impact, and audience 5.4.c. Discusses images critically with other individuals, expressing ideas, conveying meaning, and validating arguments 5.4.d. Includes textual information as needed to convey an image's meaning (e.g., using captions, referencing figures in a text, incorporating keys or legends) 5.4.e. Reflects on the effectiveness of own visual communications and use of images

Fig. 3. Detail of Alignment charts for ACRL Information Literacy Framework, Information Literacy Standards, and Visual Literacy Standards by Amanda Meeks. 2015.

Visual literacy in practice

Teaching visual literacy faces similar challenges that teaching information literacy has faced including student unawareness of available resources, discomfort with technology and tools, and information overload.[15] One resource that students and faculty often overlook when they struggle with visual information needs are the liaison librarians with subject and pedagogical knowledge aligned with their area of study, in this case art and design.

It is important to remember that art and design students are producers of visual information, and that wields a unique responsibility in this day and age. The information landscape is saturated with images as they 'have become so central to the way we share and use information, from the visual language of the internet including memes, infographics, and Instragram, as well as the charts, graphs, and other visual indicators that have been used to represent data in the workplace and academia'.[16] All students need to be prepared to navigate this landscape and make informed decisions regarding their work, from research to creation to dissemination; librarians must both learn and teach interpretation skills and how to negotiate the social, economic, political, scientific, and aesthetic relationships and meaning of images.[17] In the art and design context, visual literacy has the ability to introduce students to disciplinary methodologies, ideologies, and creative practices that will inform their academic, community, and personal endeavors from a place of agency.

In disciplines outside of the arts librarians believe visual literacy is important. However, they do not have enough time to teach visual literacy skills alongside information literacy in the one-shot instruction model most are saddled with and are unaware of the Visual Literacy Standards. Judith Schwartz found in a 2015 study that only 38% of survey participants were including visual literacy instruction in their practice. She noted these trends within those participants approach to teaching visual literacy: Image retrieval, file management, image copyright and permissions, infographics and data, design and production for poster sessions, teaching technology and software (such as Adobe products), digital storytelling with images, teaching with graphic novels, and pecha kucha presentations.[18] This study did not include how these activities were directly linked to course outcomes or a larger curriculum, but show a concerted effort on academic librarians to include visual literacy none-the-less.

It is likely that visual resource librarians have a great deal more experience in teaching visual literacy skills than subject liaison librarians. Amanda Rybin discusses training sessions she and other visual resource center librarians provide at their institution wherein they compare color-adjusted, high-resolution images from library databases with their counterparts retrieved from Google images. They've found that often, the images from Google are 'cropped or otherwise altered; at times, they are captioned with inaccurate information or not credited at all.'[19]

Jennifer Garland provided a case study in which visual literacy standards were addressed through engaging an art history course in guided hands-on learning within the McGill University rare book and special collections. Her systematic approach to addressing each standard allowed for a closer analysis and assessment of the objectives she and the teaching faculty set out to achieve. Special collections provide ample opportunities and a likely fit for integrating information and visual literacy into library instruction.[20]

Heather Gendron and Eva Sclippa provide useful insight in their article *Where Visual and Information Literacies Meet: Redesigning Research Skills Teaching and Assessment for Large Art History Survey Courses.* The authors shared how they redesigned instruction and an assignment that employed visual thinking strategies as part of students' research plan and process.[21] These are just a few of the examples within library instruction that go beyond the typical (and often requested by faculty) ARTstor and Google Image Search tutorials.

These examples also provide details on how focusing on visual literacy opens up new opportunities for librarians to collaborate with faculty in the art and design disciplines and support student learning and professional growth. Similar to the library professions' findings on information literacy, visual literacy must be taught in a scaffolded and systematic approach in order to truly be effective and promote deeper learning and sophisticated skills and abilities.[22] Tying visual literacy objectives to course objectives and outcomes, without limiting those objectives to the Visual Literacy Standards (i.e. developing new knowledge practices for a unique context) will strengthen the libraries' role in student success.

15. Rybin, Amanda. "Beyond Habit and Convention: Visual Literacy and the VRC." *Public Services Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (January 2012): 272.

16. Upson, Matt, Alex Mudd, and Kael Moffat. "Text, Image, Story: Using Photo Comics for Instruction, Promotion, and Participation in the Academic Library." *Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings* 4, no. 1 (2014): 10.

17. Little, Felten and Berry, "Liberal Education in a Visual World," 46.

18. Schwartz, "Visual Literacy Meets Information Literacy," 6.

19. Rybin, "Beyond Habit and Convention: Visual Literacy and the VRC," 273.

20. Garland, Jennifer1, jennifer. garland@mcgill.ca. "Locating Traces of Hidden Visual Culture in Rare Books and Special Collections: A Case Study in Visual Literacy." *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 313–26.

21. Gendron, Heather1, and Eva Sclippa. "Where Visual and Information Literacies Meet: Redesigning Research Skills Teaching and Assessment for Large Art History Survey Courses." *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 337.

22. Little, Felten and Berry, "Liberal Education in a Visual World," 49.

Next steps and future considerations

There is no lack of scholarly literature on visual literacy within disciplinary contexts and a growing number within art librarianship, but it does not compare with what is available on information literacy. While librarians across disciplines are increasingly incorporating the visual aspects of information into information literacy instruction there are few library and information science programs that address the need for visual literacy instruction. Art librarians (let alone other subject liaisons) do not all have training or background in visual literacy and may not feel comfortable teaching it. 'If LIS curriculum is designed to include visual literacy education, students will be trained competently to implement ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards.'[23] A recent study conducted by Jean Beaudoin examined the impact of the course content (which focused on digital libraries and image description) on LIS students' ability to: evaluate existing image records (Visual literacy standard 4), identify and analyze the content of a set of images (Visual literacy standard 3), and effectively create descriptive records for images (Visual literacy standard 5). The study also briefly touched on the students' abilities to identify terms useful in performing image research (Visual literacy standard 2). Beaudoin notes that, 'the findings of the study show that the exercises increased the students' visual literacy to varying degrees across the Standards examined.[24] The students who took part in this study found these exercises challenging and frustrating. If art and design librarians are tasked with working with visual materials as well as artists and designers our library and information science programs must go beyond simply teaching identifying, interpreting, and describing visual information in an ad hock manner.

In order to teach visual literacy art and design librarians must find or make opportunities to learn what that looks like. There are many professional organizations and Special Interest Groups within those organizations, including Art Libraries Society (ARLIS UK&Ireland) and Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA), the International visual literacy association (IVLA), and the Visual Resources Association (VRA) to name a few. For a Visual Literacy Standards-based approach to learning how to teach visual literacy there has been recent publications including *Visual literacy for libraries: A practical, standards-based guide*, which has exercises and worksheets alongside an easy-to-understand breakdown of the standards.[25]

Additionally, partnering with art and design faculty to co-teach and encouraging student-led workshops on visual media creation in the library are also valid ways to hone one's own visual literacy skills as well as navigate the visual information needs on campus. Amanda Milbourn has advocated for an embedded model of teaching visual literacy and noted that faculty collaborations are a powerful tool given that faculty are likely focus on the content analysis of images, 'but are less likely to introduce students to concepts of finding, citing or ethically and legally using images.'[26]

In looking forward, substantial research is needed in the area of visual literacy within library instruction and the art and design disciplines. Better understanding how librarians learn to look critically, where we fall short, and how we employ visual literacy within our practice as educators will help guide the development of the habits of mind needed to understand and thoroughly teach visual literacy across the library profession. Finally, it is crucial that art and design librarians work to develop, implement, and assess visual literacy at the curriculum level, as we have often done with information literacy, in order to provide models of meaningful and systematic visual literacy instruction for the academic library profession while addressing the needs of our students and faculty.

23. Ma, Yan. "Constructing and Reading Visual Information: Visual Literacy for Library and Information Science Education." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 34, no. 2 (July 2015): 12. doi:10.1080/23796529.2015.11674727.

24. Beaudoin, Joan E. "Describing Images: A Case Study of Visual Literacy among Library and Information Science Students." *College & Research Libraries* 77, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 388.

25. Brown, Nicole E, Kaila Bussert, Denise Hattwig, and Ann Medaille. *Visual literacy for libraries: a practical, standards-based guide*. American Library Association, 2016.

26. Milbourn, "A Big Picture Approach: Using Embedded Librarianship to Proactively Address the Need for Visual Literacy Instruction in Higher Education," 279.

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