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# A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS – OR IS IT?

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## INTRODUCTION

Currently the library profession has become somewhat unsatisfied with the structure and content of the current Information Literacy Competency Standards from the American Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL, 2001). The direction the revisions are taking is to redefine information literacy concepts (authorship, ethical use of information, and quality of sources) as threshold concepts (e.g., “research as inquiry” and “format as process”). Threshold concepts are not necessarily static in their definitions, but once understood can change a student’s understanding of that element of information literacy (ACRL, 2014; Townsend, Hoffer & Brunetti, 2012).

The new standards under development also characterize information literacy as more broadly connected to other literacies such as visual and digital literacies. The importance of metaliteracy to information literacy has previously been discussed in the literature (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). In fact, researchers (Hattwig, Bussert, & Burgess, 2013) have argued that visual literacy is becoming an essential aspect of information literacy given the vast amount of information now represented in both visual and digital formats. Others (Harris, 2006; Patterson, 2011) have examined how visual mapping of arguments and articles has become a useful tool in teaching students information literacy and critical reading skills.

## VISUAL LITERACY

Visual literacy has a long history in academia, and can be traced back to the 1960s with the founding of the International Visual Literacy Association by Jack Debes from Kodak and Clarence Williams of the University of Rochester, as well as others (Hattwig, Bussert, Medallie, & Burgess, 2013). More recently, ACRL (2011) has developed its own standards for Visual Literacy:

- Determine the nature and extent of the visual materials needed
- Find and access needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently
- Interpret and analyze the meanings of images and visual media
- Evaluate images and their sources
- Use images and visual media effectively
- Design and create meaningful images and visual media
- Understand many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and access and use visual materials ethically

Our current generation of students have almost certainly used at least one of the following media: Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, or Snapchat to communicate their thoughts and ideas via images. In fact, according to a recent PEW Research report (Duggan, 2013) over 50% of all Internet users post pictures online, and over 45% re-post them. Those numbers go up to 81% and 61% respectively for adults aged 18-29. To them, the image is as much (if not more) a medium of communication as

the word. This interest in the visual is echoed in argument theory and research. Although it is still debated (Flemming, 1996; Birdswell & Groerke, 2007) whether images can be arguments in and of themselves, the idea that students can learn to think critically and gain a better understanding of perspective and argument by analyzing images for claims and content is not (Blair, 2012). Images have been used in information literacy instruction as well. For example, librarians (Ravas & Stark, 2012) utilized archival photographs to teach critical thinking and information literacy skills.

## **BACKGROUND**

Inspired by the increase in image use by students and by the increasing importance of visual literacy in information literacy, I designed several image-based lesson plans for my information literacy course at California State University (CSU) East Bay. CSU East Bay is a medium-sized state university with a required Information Literacy course, LIBY 1210. This course is taught to all incoming freshman as part of their first year experience. Each section has students who are part of a cluster with a particular broad theme, such as: “Energy and the Environment” or “Making a Difference.” CSU East Bay students are very diverse and representative of Northern California’s demographics, with many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the first in their family to attend college. CSU East Bay librarians have determined that there is a statistically significant correlation between passing the LIBY 1210 course and graduating from CSU East Bay. It is important that students learn information literacy skills that they can transfer to other situations and courses and for the purposes of continuing to learn after graduation.

Most sections of the course are taught in a fairly traditional manner by both faculty and adjuncts, but some faculty have tried out more experimental designs, including flipped classrooms, teams, critical pedagogy, and use of pop culture memes. The learning outcomes for the course are based on the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2014) information literacy rubric, which is based on ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards. The need to teach students skills that can be used in other courses makes the idea of creating assignments that will broadly relate to writing an argument and research paper attractive; most of the image-based assignments build students’ skills in argument, visual literacy and information literacy, making the content more relevant to other courses and allowing students to develop stronger critical thinking skills for their future both in college and beyond. The effectiveness of these exercises is currently being evaluated via a pilot study conducted over the winter and spring quarters of 2014. Preliminary results from these studies were at the Library Instruction West Conference in 2014. Two of the image-based assignments developed for LIBY 1210 that were part of the pilot study, exploring alternative perspectives through historical and news photographs and analyzing and fact-checking an advertisement, became the focus of my hands-on workshop at LOEX 2014.

## **WORKSHOP**

In the hands-on workshop I focused on the critical evaluation of two main types of visual images, historical and news photographs and advertisements. First, I provided participants with a definition of visual literacy and a selected bibliography of sources on teaching visual literacy. Then, I led participants through two exercises in visual literacy and followed up with a discussion of the process and impact of both exercises and a discussion of how participants could incorporate images into their own instruction. The three learning outcomes for this workshop were that participants would:

- Be able to articulate how visual literacy is inter-connected to the development of information literacy and life-long learning skills.
- Be able to include visual literacy in teaching media information literacy skills by providing students with a framework to analyze advertisements and research their factual content.
- Be able to provide students with a context in which to deepen their understanding of and critical awareness of journalistic photographs.

All materials used for this workshop, including the PowerPoint on visual literacy, student examples of two exercises, and the handouts and visual materials used in presenting the exercises may be found at <http://imagininginformationliteracy.wordpress.com/>

## **ADVERTISING EXERCISE**

The first exercise focused on advertising. Teaching students media literacy has been shown to improve students' ability to critically analyze advertisements (Hobbs, 2004). In this exercise, I used Fowles (1998) method of analyzing advertisements. Fowles describes fifteen appeals, for example, the need to excel, the need to belong to a group, the need to be admired, and suggests that most advertisements contain at least one such appeal which is used to sell the product to a particular demographic. I asked LOEX workshop participants to work in groups to analyze a health food or sports drink advertisement (provided by the speaker) using the Fowles method, and also determine what claim(s) the advertisement was making, either directly or indirectly, and then research the claim(s) online. Included in this exercise was a chart used to check the reliability of at least one article they had found to evaluate the claims made in the advertisement. A handout suggesting some differences between trade, popular and scholarly journals was also provided to illuminate this process. LOEX participants, like my students, seemed very engaged in the process and were largely successful in both the analysis and fact-checking part of the process. For example, one group found a medical article reporting an empirical study to affirm one of the claims made in the advertisement.

## **PHOTOGRAPH EXERCISE**

Having students generate and answer questions about historical photographs has been used successfully as a visual literacy technique (Ravas & Stark, 2012). In the second exercise, participants again worked in groups to explore historical and contemporary photographs and analyze their representation of events. The exercise asked participants to download a photograph provided by the speaker, and then search for it using Google Image Search to try to find both the authorship of the photograph and some information about the event it represented. Participants were asked to supplement what they had found on the Web with material from library article databases, to check for accuracy. Then participants were asked some visual literacy questions about the photograph, including how truthful it was and what kind of emotional response it generated. They were also asked to find another photograph that represented an alternative viewpoint to the one contained in the first photograph.

This is where the assignment becomes very interesting as students realize how a varying perspective, from a simple change of angle to a complete change of timeframe or viewpoint can change how one interprets the event. Varying interpretations of this assignment are also possible, as students have sometimes found a parody of their photograph and used that to represent their "alternative perspective." In one of my classes, students had researched the famous "Flag Raising at Iwo Jima" photograph by Joe Rosenthal and found a parody of it used to represent a response to global warming on the cover of *Time Magazine*. They further found that the use of this photograph in this way was very controversial.

During the LOEX workshop, participants discovered that one photograph was not "real" at all, but was an artists' photoshopped interpretation of an actual event. The photograph showed a large number of people from the air, spelling out "FUKUSIMA IS HERE" with their bodies. They discovered that this was an artists' rendition of an event, which later took place on a California beach. Creating image-based information literacy exercises that leverage this kind of interaction between visual and information literacy are excellent ways to incorporate critical thinking into information literacy instruction and to deepen students' understanding of how to be more savvy consumers of information.

At the conclusion of both exercises, each group was encouraged to share their discussion highlights with the whole audience, including any ideas participants had on creating and incorporating images into their own information literacy instruction. Participant comments largely reflected a high level of interest in including some images in their information literacy exercises, along with some healthy skepticism. It was noted that these kinds of exercises might be more difficult for librarians limited to the "one-hour-one-shot" format, but that this stumbling block could be surmounted through collaboration with the disciplinary faculty. On the whole, reactions to image-based information literacy were positive

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the current and growing trend of images being used to communicate information, visual exercises are an excellent way of increasing student engagement in information literacy and also of providing a path towards incorporating threshold concepts such as "authority is constructed and contextualized" and "scholarship is a conversation" (ACRL, 2014) into information literacy instruction. For example, the photograph assignment created an opportunity for students to see how perspective can change the interpretation of events and how, often, a multiplicity of perspectives of an event exist and have been documented, providing a variety of narratives, sometimes complimentary and sometimes conflicting. The advertising assignment allowed students to see how information can be manipulated and biased, but also offered students a way to think critically about sources and to evaluate their claims for themselves. More research needs to be done to explore the efficacy of using images and other media in information literacy instruction, and more work can also be done to develop more image and multi-media-based information literacy exercises that create new and useful synergies between information and visual literacies.

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