The role of Visual Literacy in developing digital literacy skills in secondary school students: what educators need to consider.

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“If people aren’t taught the language of sound and images, shouldn’t they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read or write?”

Credit: George Lucas
1. Digital Literacy

The term 'Digital Literacy' is broad and multi-faceted, open to interpretation and constantly evolving. The number of definitive definitions of Digital Literacy or fluency are varied and many, from Wikipedia, to Microsoft.com to schools and universities, such as CSU, around the world. In addition, the term is often used interchangeably with others, such as Media Literacy, Digital Media Literacy, Transliteracy and Information Literacy/Fluency. The NMC Horizon Report (2012) lists the continued rise in importance of digital media literacy as the third most important challenge to education institutions.

Then there is the perception that students or 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), who have grown up in and experience daily, the digital world, are naturally digitally literate; a view that subsequent research (Palfrey & Glasser, 2008; Brumberger, 2011) is proving false - that in fact, students are immersed in and experiencing the digital world, rather than creating, critiquing, analysing and challenging it.

Boyd (2014, p.176) concurs that, while the Net Generation is accustomed to living online and engaging with technology, their knowledge, understanding, experience and ability to interpret, analyse, evaluate and critically engage with visual and digital texts is not automatic, and needs to be taught. This was not necessary in previous generations, prior to the internet, when publishers and curators provided such evaluations, hence the increasing need for these skills today.

It is apparent, then, that any organisation undertaking the up skilling of students, teachers and employees in digital literacy, will require a definitive decision on what digital literacy looks like, is comprised of and how evidence of such literacy will be measured, in their institution.
2. THE COMPONENTS OF DIGITAL LITERACY

The choices are many -

**Steve Wheeler (2014)** - 'new literacies' of social networking, privacy maintenance, identity management, content creation, curation and organisation, repurposing, self presentation and transliteracy.

The 8 elements of Digital Literacy.

**ISTE Standards** for students and teachers, includes VL in all of the elements.

**Doug Belshaw (2011)** - the 8 elements of Digital Literacy.

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning incorporates the skills and literacies, within a graphic that also represents student outcomes and support systems.

**Futurelab** - Digital Literacy across the Curriculum model.

**Kathy Schrock** has listed a more extensive list of literacies in her model.
3. A PLACE FOR VISUAL LITERACY

On closer inspection, it is evident that each version of digital literacy contains many of the aspects of the others, while including variations and differing areas of emphasis, yet they all include Visual Literacy in some form. Clearly, Digital Literacy is comprised of a selection of lower order ICT skills, higher order critical, evaluation and analysis competencies and opportunities to collaborate and understand/demonstrate the responsibilities of having an online presence.

So why is the explicit teaching and assessment of Visual Literacy (VL), a consistent element of Digital Literacy, frequently overlooked within secondary classrooms, even when the task requires a multi-modal component?
4. VISUAL LITERACY (VL)

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2014) states that "Literacy involves students in listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts."

And ACARA is clear that teachers are responsible for teaching all literacies for each key learning area. Since visual and digital texts are specifically listed, the expectation of the Australian Curriculum authority is that every educator will be teaching VL within their field. Yet, the work of Susan Metros (2006) posits that visual literacy among the digital generation has evolved haphazardly and will continue to do so, until:

- educational institutions explicitly list visual literacy alongside the three Rs,
- include an explicit curriculum and
- educators clearly understand the vital role of visual literacy in society.

And the benefits of VL (Auburn & Ausburn, 1978) continue to be cited today (Frynt & Brozo, 2010); (Serafini, 2014)

Gibson, Friesen and Martin (2008, slide 4) define Digital Visual Literacy as a set of vital interdisciplinary skills that enable us to function in a digital, visual workplace, listing the skills of critically evaluating, using and creating still and moving visual images and data. And it is the multimodality of the modern world (Serafini, 2014) that is driving the need for VL.

But it is the work of David McCandless (2013) and Hans Rosling that perhaps best demonstrates the place of data visualisation and visual literacy through the use of data and graphics, enabling the language of the eye and the language of the mind to connect and collaborate, to make meaning, create and co-create stories. Information is just information without visual representation, yet visual representation is incomplete if we fail to ask the right questions around author, bias, data included and omitted, intended audience and motive (Thoman & Jolis, 2003). It is the skills of VL that enable us to see the 'complete story'.
In 2010, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) produced a comprehensive breakdown of the elements of visual literacy and the competency standards, ranked 1-6, of a visually literate higher education student.

The complexities and details of such graphics provides educators with a clearer idea of the extensive number of elements that are required to be visually literate, and the realisation that this level of complexity cannot be assumed, but needs to be explicitly taught.
6. TRIVIAL, TRANSITORY AND UNACADEMIC

So why then, is the Visual Literacy element of Digital Literacy not translating into tasks and assessment in schools, when extensive research, by Philip & Garcia (2013), Boyd (2013), and Osterman, (2012) has demonstrated the integral nature of visual literacy?

It could be that:

- Reading words and images is assumed to have been dealt with in primary education and not applicable to secondary;
- VL can be interpreted in multiple ways, but most commonly for critiquing art and media, creating the perception that it is an Arts skill;
- There is insufficient knowledge and understanding of the role of VL in the curriculum, and perhaps there is merit in identifying the percentage of time allocated to teaching teachers learning theory and design, in their initial training and throughout their careers, to determine if this is a factor;
- the highly complex nature of teaching and assessing visual literacy, as can be seen by ACRLs elements and standards of visual literacy and the Periodic Table of Visualisation Methods is overwhelming. Visual literacy is a highly analytical and questioning skill, with multiple interpretations, making it more difficult to measure progress and competency; as opposed to more traditional skills where answers are right or wrong and can be 'fed' to students (Daly, 2004).
- integrating new disciplines takes time to allow new patterns of thinking to become habitual (Cronin, 2010).

The QCS CCEs identifies the different types of images that require interpretation, analysis and creative use, to demonstrate understanding across all subject areas. So, VL is multidisciplinary, as we analyse maps, data and graphs in geography and business; symbols and equations in mathematics and science; images in art, English and history (Bamford, 2011). Some KLAs, when using CCEs, call VL 'source evaluation', focusing on the elements relevant to their subject, yet there is generally little evidence of criteria being addressed across subjects and year levels.

Put simply, VL is an integral part of 21st century culture and can no longer be considered trivial, transitory or non-academic (Bleed, 2005, p.8).
8. VALUED AND SUPPORTED

Visual Literacy affords learners the opportunity to connect with the world and each other; understanding their role and the role of others in everything that they view, however there are many aspects of Visual Literacy that need to be learned by educators, in order to be effectively taught to students (Turner, 2013). The challenge faced by those striving to make Visual Literacy an embedded element of all learning, is not dissimilar to the challenge of embedding ICTs into every aspect of the curriculum; in fact it is one part of the embedding ICT/digital literacy challenge.

The need for VL highlights a growing awareness that educators will require considerable support and training in order to do this well. Metros & Woolsey (2006) challenge the leadership of institutions to commit to establishing strategic goals to:

- enculturate visual literacy into every aspect of the curriculum,
- facilitate a new way of thinking, problem-solving, collaborating and communicating, in order for it be seen as a valuable part of every curriculum. Her position indicates that change is required from the top down, within institutions, as well as through teacher training courses.

At the same time, educators and departments can develop an understanding of engaged, reconnected learning, and apply the four design principles of connected, co-created, integrated and personal (Learning Frontiers, 2014) into 21st century learning and make use of the plethora of models available, to build a spiral curriculum, and assess accordingly.
Since learning theories, design models and teaching/learning pedagogies all incorporate elements of visual literacy within higher order activities, providing educators with a selection of visual literacy models, criteria and resources, to enable a step by step progression for embedding VL into a higher order thinking secondary curriculum, is imperative.

Any one of the following would provide a starting point, as those who are visually literate have also addressed a portion of Digital, Literacy, Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship.

**The Visual Literacy Toolbox**

- Seeing is Deceiving: Visual Literacy in an Information Age
- Media Centre for Literacy - MediaLit Kit
- Visual literacy across the arts
- ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards
  - [http://www.slideshare.net/johnmacasio/acrl-visual-literacy-competency-standards](http://www.slideshare.net/johnmacasio/acrl-visual-literacy-competency-standards)
- Visual Literacy White Paper
- The Educators Role in preparing a visually literate citizenry
- Digital and Information Literacy Framework
10. References


